

5
NOVEL

Reincarnated as a **Sword**

WRITTEN BY
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Reincarnated as a **Sword**

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written by
Yuu Tanaka

illustrated by
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Seven Seas Entertainment

REINCARNATED AS A SWORD VOL. 5

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Illustrations by Llo

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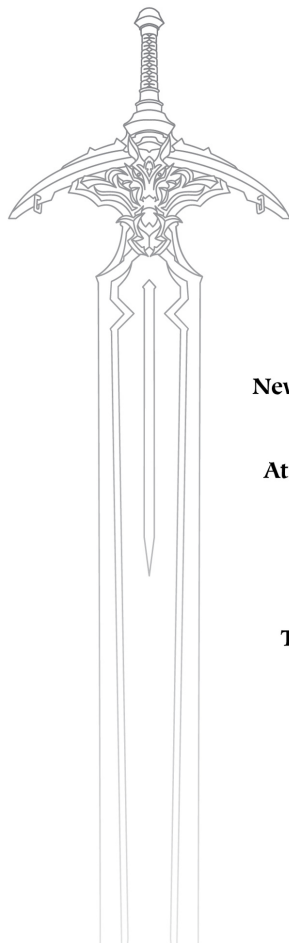
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Chapter 1: Ulmutt Bound

M_{UNCH, MUNCH.}

Gobble, gobble.

You guys have been eating curry for days now. Aren't you bored of it?

"Nope."

"Woof!"

I see.

Three days had passed since we left Bulbola.

We were on our way to Ulmutt, making camp in a clearing next to the forest. This area was a designated resting place for travelers. The ground was flat and even, and there was a small well to draw water. A convenient spot, which unfortunately meant it was often a den of bandits and monsters. Travelers who visited to drink could end up permanently relieved of their thirst, among other things.

City soldiers and adventurers served as the area's caretakers, but year-round maintenance was high - impossible. We spotted some goblins making a mess of the place when we arrived, although they were easily eliminated with a few spells. Then we pitched camp and got to the business of dinner.

Curry was on the menu again. Fran had a plate of hot beef, while Jet enjoyed a bowl of ultrahot fish. I'd have preferred they eat a well-balanced meal, but I had promised them a week of all-you-can-eat curry when we left Bulbola, and they still had a few days to go.

"So good."

“Arf arf.”

The phrase “bored of curry” didn’t exist in their vocabulary. Even though they’d had it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner for three days now, they always reacted like they had never tasted it before. It was a good thing I’d made several pots.

Still, it was only a matter of time until we ran out of ingredients. That would be bad. Especially for Fran’s mental health. Fortunately, we’d loaded up on spices before we left Bulbola. All we really needed was a kitchen. I wanted to make a batch here at the outpost but didn’t want to risk a random traveler happening upon a flying sword stirring a pot of curry. I gave myself a pat on the blade for being cautious.

“Yum... Teacher.”

I know. Someone’s coming.

“Woof.”

Fran and Jet halted their feast and readied themselves for a fight, but the yellow splotches of food around their mouths stopped them from being intimidating.

The newcomer was no ordinary man. We couldn’t pick up on their presence until they stepped into the outpost, which meant they were using some sort of stealth skill to conceal their aura. Our guest was no neophyte.

We were concealing ourselves, too, but our campfire gave us away. The stranger must’ve seen Fran from afar, but I didn’t sense any malice from them yet...

“Why, hello there.”

“Hi.”

“I didn’t think anyone would beat me to this place tonight.”

“Hm...”

An old man emerged from the darkness. He looked to be over sixty years old, yet retained an athletic symmetry to his body. Perhaps he was a warrior of sorts.

His gray hair was slicked back to his shoulders, and he had a fashionable gray beard that made me think he'd been a dandy in his youth. His black suit was decorated with embroidery. It looked like a tuxedo from afar, but upon closer inspection, I saw it was a suit of light armor, made of fabric and leather.

The man smiled as he addressed Fran, despite Jet standing right there. If he was skilled enough to track Fran from a distance, he didn't need to be overly cautious around her. His attitude told me that the old man was a lot stronger than he looked.

He slipped past Fran as she sat down, and stood right in the corner of her vision. Startled, Fran got up again.

Fran, whatever you do, do not engage!

He's...that good?

Yeah...about on par with Amanda, I'd say.

...!

I used Identify to reveal the old man's immense battle prowess. For a moment, I thought the skill had bugged out.

Name: Dias

Age: 71

Race: Human

Class: Phantasmist

Level: 76/99

HP: 241; Magic: 668; Strength: 122; Agility: 291

Skills: Sensitive Sole 4; Intimidate 4; Conceal 7; Stealth 8; Disassemble 8; Martial Arts 4; Sense Disruption 7; Fade 7; Sleight of Hand 8; Reveal Weakness 4; Royal Etiquette 6; Presence Sense 8; Conceal Presence 7; Illusion Magic 10; Phantasm Magic 6; Reveal Vulnerability 10; Hush 3; Abnormal Status Resistance 5; Dagger Arts 7; Dagger Mastery 7; Earth Magic 3; Magic Tricks 10; Throw 7; Poison Magic 4; Fire Magic 3; Mana Drain 2; Magic Resistance 3; Mana Sense 6; Charm Resistance 4; Carpentry 4; Play 7; Disarm Trap 7; Trap Sense 8; Lay Trap 7; Spirit Manipulation; Dull Pain; Fortitude; Split Thinking; Mana Manipulation.

Unique Skill: Skill Amnesia 7

Class Skill: Mental Suggestion 8; Visual Suggestion 8

Titles: Illusionist; Trickster; Surpasser of Human Limits

Equipment: Dragonfang Dagger; Dragonscale Suit; Fleetfoot Boots; Bracelet of Sacrifice; Phantasmist Ring

At Level 70, this guy was stronger than Amanda and Forlund. A master magician, and a formidable fighter, too. His skills made him dangerous even while unarmed. Magic Tricks and Sleight of Hand could make him a talented assassin. He had a Unique Skill of his own as well.

Skill Amnesia: Causes opponent to forget a targeted skill for a period of time. Duration is determined by skill's level and rarity. Maximum duration of one minute. Recast is determined by skill's level and rarity.

Well, that was distressingly strong. A minute of forgetfulness was all this Phantasmist needed to finish a battle.

Mental Suggestion: Plants an instantaneous suggestion in a target's mind, making them more susceptible to persuasion.

Visual Suggestion: Plants an instantaneous suggestion in a target's sight, creating an illusion in their field of vision.

These two skills, combined with Fade and Conceal Presence, made up an arsenal of stealth skills. I imagined he could make himself disappear in the heat of battle with Illusion Magic, too. As his Phantasmist class suggested, Dias was a master of mirage. Even up against a stronger opponent, I doubted he would be easy to hit.

We didn't know his intentions, so I thought it best to stay on his good side for now.

He uses illusions. Listen—

As I was about to warn Fran to stay at a safe distance, Dias opened his mouth. What he said sent chills down my blade.

"You Identified me just now, didn't you?" His tone was gentle, but his eyes weren't amused.

So he *did* notice! I had a bad feeling when I saw Identify Sense in his skill list. Did we sour his mood? I hoped not. I hoped the weathered old man could find it in his heart to forgive the curiosity of a little girl.

Instead, Dias narrowed his eyes and focused on Fran.

Identify gave you a peek at your target's personal information. It was only natural that it was considered an attack by those with secrets, people with a guilty conscience, and, naturally, private individuals.

I should've anticipated there was a skill which allowed you to know when you'd been Identified, considering all the other Sense skills we'd seen. If Identify provoked this old man to attack Fran, it would be my fault!

Sorry.

What's done is done.

Just get ready to teleport out of here if things go south.

Hm.

"Hmm..."

The aura around Dias grew even more menacing. Were we in for a fight? We watched the old man for any sudden moves, but he broke the silence with a chuckle.

"No need to be so cautious now." His grim mask flipped into a smile. "I promise you I'm not upset."

He spoke teasingly, and the intimidating aura we'd felt a second ago was gone like a bad dream. He smiled.

"You have every reason to be suspicious of strangers in a place like this. Don't expect everyone to be as understanding, however. There are people who will fly off the handle if you Identify them. You must pick your targets carefully."

I listened, despite my general dislike for being lectured. Fran took his advice the same way and answered with a docile nod.

"Just a bit of advice from an old adventurer."

"Old adventurer"? The phrase had an odd ring to it.

Fran felt the same way. “You knew I was an adventurer?”

“Yes. People were talking about you at the guild in Bulbola.”

Was he in Bulbola during the incident? People would’ve talked if a veteran of his caliber were around.

“You were in Bulbola?”

“Only two days ago. I could’ve helped if I had arrived a few days earlier.”

So he wasn’t there when Linford nearly razed the city. Wait...two days ago? We’d departed Bulbola three days ago, and ridden Jet the entire way here. With his ability to run through the air, Jet could cover a lot more ground than a horse. Had Dias caught up with us in spite of all that?

Fran looked at Jet, then back at Dias. The old man knew what was bothering her.

“I’m light on my feet, you see. I have a bit of endurance as well. I ran all the way without stopping.”

He wasn’t lying. He’d run a straight marathon without even slowing down. Dias’s stats were a testament to his superhuman strength. There was no need to treat him like an old man.

“I had business to take care of in Bulbola when I heard people talking about you. A Black Cat and a black wolf. The student of a chef who cooked strange yellow food. You are quite difficult to mistake, Swordceress Fran.”

Dias had deduced Fran’s identity instantly.

“You already know my name, but allow me to properly introduce myself. I am Dias. An adventurer.”

“I’m Fran, D-Rank Adventurer. This is Jet.”

“Woof!”

“A pleasure to meet you both.”

They maintained their distance, even after making their introductions. Fran kept her eyes on Dias as he tried getting her to let her guard down. Faced with Fran’s apparent rudeness, his smile only broadened.

“Yes, very good. You won’t make it far as an adventurer without being careful.”

He was like a wise old grandfather teaching his grandkid. They were the right ages for the comparison at least.

“I’ll give you another piece of advice, young Fran. Identify is a common skill, but I sense that you use it quite often.”

“Hm.”

I was the one using it, to be exact.

“As I said, you should pick your marks carefully. Royalty tend to have the Identify Sense skill, and they don’t take kindly to people snooping around.”

If we caught a whiff of a royal secret...

“You have a bright future ahead of you, and I’m sure you’ll have an audience with royalty one day. Take care you don’t offend them, or...”

Dias made a chopping motion across his neck with his hand. He was right. I should be more careful.

“Got it.”

“Well, I’ll be on my way then. It looks like my presence is making you tense.”

“Hm.”

“Goodness, you won’t do me the kindness of saying that isn’t so?”

“No. Because it’s true.”

“Hahaha, how mean. Well, a healthy dose of paranoia is a necessary part of the job. I’ll see you soon.”

Dias laughed as he walked away. He waved to Fran before disappearing into the darkness.

He’s gone...

“Hm.”

“Woof.”

Despite his lack of hostility, dealing with a stranger leagues stronger than us was still exhausting. We relaxed as he faded away.

Looks like he’s bound for Ulmutt, too. Maybe we’ll run into him there.

Munch, munch. “Yeah, maybe.”

Gobble, gobble.

They sure didn’t waste any time returning to their dinner!

“Hm?” *Munch.*

Nothing. How’s the food? Good?

“Hm! Amazing.”

That was good enough for me. The terrible encounters with monsters and powerful adventurers seemed to have prepared Fran for Dias. I, on the other hand, needed to do some introspection.

I needed to be wary of Identify Sense, and more discreet about Identifying dangerous entities, and even nobles, from now on.

The day after we ran into Dias, and three weeks since we left Alessa, we finally came within sight of the Dungeon

City of Ulmutt.

“Teacher, is that the one?”

“Woof!”

Yeah, that must be the Dungeon City.

Ulmutt was located in the middle of a forest and surrounded by thick walls. Alessa felt like such a long time ago... Even though not much time had actually passed, the things we’d been through lengthened our perception of it. We’d fought a Lich on a floating island, aided a revolution in the naval kingdom of Seedrun, participated in Bulbola’s great cooking contest, and somehow faced an archfiend immediately afterward.

Fran had grown mentally and physically stronger.

We’d promised Garrus the blacksmith that we would see him again in Ulmutt, and I was sure he would be surprised at the progress she’d made. He might not even recognize her!

“Hm?”

Fran seemed to notice my gaze, and turned her head to look at me. Her face was adorable, as usual.

I...might have been getting ahead of myself.

“What do you mean?”

Don’t worry about it. I was just thinking that we’ve finally made it.

“Hm. It’s smaller than I thought. There’s something weird going on, too.”

“Arf?”

Ulmutt was a small city. It was nothing compared to Bulbola, and only about half the size of Alessa. However, the city’s diminished size did nothing to lessen its imposing stature. We had a clear view from Jet’s back, and the first

thing that caught my eye were the walls which protected the town. You could tell the walls were thick, even from a distance. And they built them high too. I suppose they needed all the protection they could get from the local monsters, but even Bulbola, the jewel of Granzell, was nowhere near this fortified.

The defenses seemed heavy for such a small city. Did it really need to be so well guarded?

A gigantic tower-like structure loomed on the eastern side. It was difficult to miss. Was it built using magic? The structure reminded me of the concrete towers back on Earth. It was about thirty meters tall, and looked like it could be used as a stronghold, but I could only speculate about its true purpose for now.

We'll have to go there to find out.

"Hm."

"Woof."

Getting into town was going to be difficult. A thousand people were waiting at the city gates. I should've expected that. The fighting tournament was famous throughout Granzell and attracted adventurers, merchants, and tourists alike.

With Bulbola's Festival of the Moons wrapped up, I figured most of the people who'd attended it were here now. Anyone who left the port city before the incident with the Archfiend would be arriving in Ulmutt around this time. Thinking about having to wait in that line was enough to make me ill, but we weren't nobility, and didn't have the privilege of skipping the queue. And riding Jet over the walls was basically asking for trouble.

Oh, well. Let's find the back of the line.

"Hm."

Jet, land somewhere away from everyone. Landing right in the middle of the line would cause a commotion.

“Woof!”

Jet found a quiet place in the forest, about 200 meters away. From there, we walked to the highway and set out for Ulmutt on foot.

We were greeted by a huge crowd. After some questioning, we confirmed that this was the only way to get into Ulmutt, so we joined the line. A girl with a sword on her back and a wolf familiar would’ve stuck out like a sore thumb anywhere else, but not in the Dungeon City of Ulmutt. There were a lot of adventurers here, and, because the dungeon itself wasn’t too difficult, many beginners.

Kids around Fran’s age weren’t a rare sight. Further in line was an adventurer who looked to be in their mid-teens. There weren’t too many Tamer classes, although I still felt the presence of their familiars.

That said, none of them were quite as young as Fran.

Let’s just get in line.

“Hm.”

We finally joined the queue, but...

This line isn’t moving. At all.

Progress was as slow as molasses.

Listening to the merchants in front of us, we discovered that Ulmutt had two dungeons, which were home to substances used to make dangerous drugs and catalysts for dark rituals. If you weren’t an adventurer, you were rigorously screened on entry. Once you passed screening, you were allowed to freely enter the city for half a year, but at this time of year, merchants and spectators always crowded the gates for the fighting tournament. The yearly

crowd was part of Ulmutt's seasonal scenery. Someone had probably written a song about it.

Some of the shrewder merchants were already selling food to those waiting, stationing themselves along the line with mats to hawk their wares. Some of them even cried to potential customers from makeshift stalls. Many things were on sale here: food, handmade souvenirs, even alcohol. It reminded me of the waiting line for back on Earth, where the event started as soon as you got in line.

The veterans had already whipped out their folding chairs and started drinking. Just like home.

Looks like we'll have to be patient.

"Hm."

Thirty minutes later...

Goblin.

Ogre.

Uhh...dragon.

Kobold.

Hang on, let me think... Demon.

Chimaera.

Hmmm.

We had decided to play a little word association game to pass the time. I'd explained the rules, and Fran genuinely seemed to enjoy it. The subject today was monster names. It made waiting our turn a little more bearable. However, not everyone was blessed with the virtue of patience.

Adventurers, aggressive by temperament if not by vocation, got into arguments with each other as the line crawled along. The arguments hadn't developed into shouting

matches quite yet, but I could imagine a brawl breaking out soon.

I wished they'd understand they were only making it worse. We watched from afar as they squabbled, but our peace wouldn't last for much longer.

"Hey, kid! Get over here!" a bearded adventurer shouted arrogantly.

"..."

"Hey, kid!"

"..."

"I'm talking to you, punk!"

"Hmm..."

Fran paid him no mind whatsoever. The adventurer was flushed with anger. Then again, he had been drinking all day, so it was probably the alcohol. His face was as red as an apple.

I didn't need to use Identify to know he was weak. His footwork was all wrong, his equipment looked shabby, and even the strongest adventurers probably couldn't fight as drunk as he was.

Hmm...

Fran.

Giving up, Teacher?

No, we have a guest.

"Hm?"

Fran finally turned toward the man. Boy, was he angry. I could see veins bulging across his neck. He clearly had a short fuse if his dignity was that hurt by just a few seconds of ignoring him.

"I had half a mind to buy you a drink, but you went and pissed me off, kid!"

Fran gave him an annoyed look. "Urgh, keep it down," she muttered, covering her cat ears.

That only earned her more of his ire. "You little twerp! You think you're better than me?!"

He really was making quite a scene, and he wasn't the only one looking at Fran. A group of passing adventurers stopped, and their leader turned to stare at Fran. He had golden blond hair and looked to be a nobleman's son. As much as I hated to admit it, he was devilishly handsome.

"You."

Ew. I already disliked him just from his voice! I couldn't believe he would talk to Fran, given the current circumstances, but "reading the room" probably wasn't part of his skillset.

"You," he said again, ignoring the drunken man and speaking to Fran. "Come hither."

"..."

Fran just ignored him, too. She didn't mean anything by it. And besides, it was his fault for trying to strike up a conversation when Fran was clearly occupied. However, he didn't take kindly to it.

"I did not think you would ignore my call."

He was arrogant, that was for sure. Judging by his demeanor, he probably came from a long line of aristocrats.

"How dare you ignore Lord Seldio when he speaks to you! The nerve!"

"Lord Seldio, what would you have us do to this girl?"

So he *was* some kind of noble. He had three companions: a mage girl, a scout, and a large man in heavy

armor. The mage and the scout seemed like your run-of-the-mill adventurers, but the big man caught my eye. Unlike his two comrades, he stood still as a statue. I couldn't see his face through his helmet, but he was clearly the strongest of them. If things went south, he'd be our first concern.

"You."

The handsome idiot resumed his spiel. Listening to his voice was enough to send shivers up my spine. I felt like I was getting an allergic reaction—only instead of breaking out in hives, I almost broke out in a fury.

Before I could say anything to Fran, Seldio reached out to her. Although she had ignored him, I didn't sense any hostility. He was slow, too, so he couldn't have been preparing for an attack. Still, I kept a close eye on him, and readied Telekinesis just in case.

I thought he was going to put his hand on Fran's shoulder and turn her around, but he didn't. In fact...was he reaching for my hilt? My god, he really was.

Fran finally took notice at that. "Hm?" She batted him away with the back of her hand and glared at him. What was this guy trying to pull? Touching another adventurer's sword was grounds for a fight to the death.

The hostility was clearly radiating from Fran now, but Seldio only tilted his head like he didn't understand. His lackeys filled in for his lack of a reaction.

"How dare you hit Lord Seldio's hand!"

"The nerve!"

Fran made no attempt to conceal her bad temper. "What do you want?"

"Give me that sword."

Was he really trying to shake us down in front of this huge crowd?

"What? No."

"I am a high-rank adventurer. A noble in fact."

"And?"

"The entire world would benefit from me wielding that sword. You must understand that?"

"I really don't."

"Enough idle chatter. Hand me the sword."

"?"

Fran could only stand there dumbfounded, her hostility now accompanied by confusion. If he'd been blatantly malicious with his demands, she would've cut him down right there. But this man had an earnest expression on his face that lacked any ill-will.

"He's going after her next is he? The poor thing."

"Why don't you stop him then?"

"Are you kidding? The guy may be a nutcase, but he actually knows how to handle himself. I wonder what he's doing in Ulmutt?"

Judging by the whispers of the surrounding crowd, I guessed this wasn't the first time Seldio had tried to take someone else's weapon. The two adventurers only looked at Fran in sympathy.

"I shall compensate you with any amount of money. You would be able to retire. This isn't a profession suited for young girls, you see. I shall take your sword and the responsibility that goes with it, and wield it for the good of the people." Seldio tapped his chest as if to reassure her that he would take up her fight. "Your sword must long for me to use it."

"He doesn't."

Damn right I don't.

“Ah, but I understand how a sword feels. A child like you is unsuited for that blade. You could stop fighting and return to your life as an ordinary girl. What is holding you back?”

“You don’t know me.”

Yeah, you don’t know Fran like I do!

Even after her blunt refusal, Seldio refused to shut his mouth.

“You are slow to understand, little girl. Are you so reluctant to part with your enchanted blade? I suppose it does give off an air of great worth...but it saddens me that you cannot see past your own selfish gains. I suppose I must teach you a lesson. For your own good of course. Worry not, for I will not spoil you by sparing the rod.”

To make matters more irritating, he had yet to utter a single lie. I kept up Essence of Falsehood, but Seldio meant every word. Each of his mad statements were accompanied by supreme self-righteousness. He even felt perfectly justified in using violence against a little girl.

He’d managed to make me feel nauseated, despite my lack of an organic stomach. I didn’t know delusional people could be literally sickening to be around. Maybe he was eccentric, or just mad. It made no difference to me. I’d rather be swung around by a goblin than be in his hands. My entire being rejected him. It was a matter of principle.

I swear I’m getting goosebumps.

The more Seldio talked, the more murderous Fran grew. She knew it was only a matter of time before he grabbed me for himself.

Should I kill him?

Let’s wait and see.

Disposing of him wouldn't be difficult. He said he was a high-ranking adventurer, but he really wasn't that strong. However, when I identified him, I found he did have the title of Baron. If we killed him, things would get messy. Should we flee? Outrunning them wouldn't be hard, but I didn't think he'd give up that easily...

"Have you decided to yield your sword? I can give you more money if that is what's stopping you. Here, this should be enough for a couple years."

His offer was 500,000 gold. That was cheap. I happened to be a magic sword. Five hundred thousand? Was this guy serious?

"..."

Fran was quiet with anger, but Seldio took it as a negotiation tactic. He clicked his tongue. "You're saying this isn't enough? Love of money is the root of all evil, you know? Well then. Shall I take you as my bride?"

Excuse me? Did I hear that right? This moron's out of his mind.

"Yes, I suppose that would be compensation enough. You look the homely type, but I trust that you'll clean up well. Consider it an honor. I come from a family of marquises. As my wife, you will be treated to the finest things in life. A wonderful proposition, especially for a beastman like yourself."

...

"You will have access to all that I have. Surely that is enough."

He didn't imagine for a second that anyone would turn him down. In fact, he expected Fran to be crying tears of joy.

Hahaha. Make Fran your wife? First you try to steal *me*, and now you want to marry *her*? Oh, I know where your

intentions lie, kiddie fiddler!

Fran looked dumbfounded, which was just as well for him. If she'd understood, she might have attacked him out of pure revulsion.

All right, you little prick. I'm gonna cut you up into little

—

But just as I was about to rain hell down upon him, our previous guest reminded us of his presence.

“Who do you think you are, acting like I’m not here?!” the drunk shouted.

I had completely forgotten about him. By now, the man was in a drunken fury.

“You assholes! I’m gonna hurt you real bad!”

Was he really going to attack a child in the middle of a large crowd? This guy was a class act. Maybe he thought threatening Fran and Seldio would scare them out of it. It still seemed like a stupid move, considering Seldio was the son of a nobleman.

“Raaargh!”

No, he was probably just too drunk to think things through.

“Hm.”

His menacing cry did nothing to sway Fran’s cool head. She ducked under the drunk’s lumbering arm and struck him in the solar plexus. The punch looked straightforward enough, but there was no mistaking the damage it caused. The onlookers couldn’t quite believe what they were seeing.

“Eargh!”

Fran’s hook sent the man flying across the ground for some distance.

Did you hold back?

Yeah. I didn't need you for that.

That...might still have been a little much though.

Hm. Controlling my strength is kinda hard.

Fran had yet to master the Compound Skills she got after the battle with the Lich. Going full force against a powerful enemy was easy enough. She wasn't perfectly efficient with her mana use, but she had me as an external tank. However, holding back required control and finesse. Fran still hadn't gotten the hang of it.

It was like driving a car. Flooring the gas pedal was easy enough, but slowing down for perfect control in a tight turn took a lot of practice.

"Hurk..."

The drunk guy convulsed as blood and vomit poured out of his mouth. I couldn't say that he didn't deserve it. How could he have the nerve to attack a girl barely in her teens? Nevertheless, some people took issue with it.

"Bulras! Are you all right?!"

"The hell'd you do to him, punk?!"

"Whatever that was, you didn't have to do it!"

The drunk's friends gathered around the man squirming on the ground. They yelled at Fran, ignoring the fact that he'd intended to hit a minor.

And then they all drew their swords.

Bulras's friends were as drunk as he was. Their faces were beet red and their breath reeked of alcohol. Intoxication gave them a bad temper. Not that it excused their behavior. The men stumbled over to Fran in a drunken stupor, and it wasn't long before they joined Bulras squirming on the ground.

"Oeergh..."

“Wargh...”

As much as they brought it upon themselves, the sight of the four men losing their lunch was disgusting. The other people waiting in line jumped back to avoid the vomit. They all looked at Fran, as if asking her to do something about the mess she had made. I supposed we were kind of at fault for not gauging our strength correctly...

Now, how should we keep them away?

As I pondered the question, some soldiers approached from the direction of the gate.

“You there! The child!”

The man who shouted wore an angry expression. He didn’t look like he’d accept self-defense as a reason for this ruckus, as legitimate as it was. It would be nice if the people around us would speak up and tell the truth...

Fran looked around, but was greeted by the sight of people unanimously turning away. I thought we could somehow pin the entire thing on Seldio, but he had already left.

Damn it! He’s gone!

Seldio might have lacked the capacity to read the room, but his friends certainly didn’t. As a result, a single girl was left as the cause of four men’s blood and vomit.

“You’re making it hard for us to do our jobs, girl. Can’t you see how busy we are?”

“Let’s get you to the station.”

“Come on, move it.”

The soldiers weren’t planning on giving Fran a fair hearing. We’d already been in line for an hour. Having to start again would be awful, but these soldiers didn’t seem

reasonable. They glared at Fran. I suspected they'd throw her in a jail cell out of pure spite.

And what about the four men sprawled out on the ground? Were the soldiers really going to let them lay there and bring Fran in for self-defense?

"What about them?"

"Shut up! Don't talk unless you're spoken to!"

"You're making our job worse than it already is!"

"Keep talking, girl, and we'll toss you in a cell."

Maybe the four men didn't need to be taken into custody, but they definitely needed medical attention. These guards were no better than thugs. That said, we couldn't exactly run away.

We'll have to do what they tell us, Fran. Those idiots might've started the fight, but we still beat them up.

Hm. Can't be helped.

As Fran quietly consented, a voice interjected.

"Now, wait just a second there."

Huh?

I recognized that voice. We'd talked to him just the other night. What surprised me was the fact that I didn't detect him. The old man really had a knack for giving people heart attacks.

"She's done nothing wrong." Dias, the old adventurer, came to Fran's defense. He wore the same relaxed smile as last night.

"Huh? And who the hell are you?"

The guard glared at Dias condescendingly. Was he going to try and throw down? Unfortunately, I didn't get to see Dias in action quite yet.

“S-stop it, you idiot! Who do you think that is?!”

“A-apologies, sir! He only started working in the city recently!”

“Forgive us for our insolence, Sir Dias!”

The remaining soldiers smacked the glaring man across the head and bowed deeply. They followed up with profuse apologies, accompanied with perfectly appeasing smiles. The difference in their attitudes was night and day.

The old man was more influential than he seemed. He didn't have a surname when I identified him, so his influence didn't come from a bloodline. No, Dias might not officially be an A-Rank, but an adventurer of his experience and power was still a force to be reckoned with. I wouldn't be surprised if his words held more sway than a noble's.

“What brings you to our corner of the city, sir?”

“I just happened to be passing by.”

Dias smiled fiercely, although his eyes weren't in on the action. His intimidating gaze drilled holes into the guardsmen. They turned visibly pale.

“I-I see.”

“If I may repeat myself, the girl did nothing wrong. The men lying on the ground started this mess. I'm sorry that you boys have to get your uniforms dirty today, but you'll take them away, won't you?”

“Y-yes, of course!”

“Affirmative, Sir Dias!”

Wow, so that was it? The guards didn't want to get their hands dirty with blood and vomit, so they were content to arrest Fran instead? Fran would've been framed for the entire affair if it weren't for Dias. We owed him one.

The guards hurriedly got the four men on their feet and scurried away.

“Thank you.”

Fran bowed her head, and Dias returned her gesture with a warm smile.

“You are very welcome. We can’t have a promising adventurer get dragged into petty squabbles like this, can we?”

“Why not?”

“Hahaha. I’ll tell you some time later. Maybe. But now, I have to go. I’ll be seeing you,” Dias said suggestively as he left.

What was that about? Didn’t he say the same thing last night? Was he stalking us? Maybe that was just how he said his goodbyes.

Fran was left alone with the terrified glances of the people around her. Good thing they let us back into our previous spot in line. I guess they didn’t want any trouble. Some of them visibly reeled back from her. She had gained the reputation of a girl who would immediately resort to extreme violence.

At least it was a perfect defense against nosy rubberneckers.

“I’m bored.”

How long was this going to take?

We might as well continue our word association.

An hour after Dias saved us, we finally entered Ulmutt. Reaching the gates took ages, but the screening took no time at all. Fran was a licensed adventurer without a

criminal record, after all. The merchants and tourists took much longer.

“Wow. Look at the size of that fort!”

It was huge when we saw it from the outside, but it's downright gigantic from this angle.

“Woof!”

The streets of the residential area were paved with stone, just like the downtown areas of Alessa and Bulbola. The houses themselves were short and stout, in jarring contrast to the gigantic structures about the city. I appreciated the contrast, since it gave me a rough idea of the size of each building.

Let's drop by the Adventurer's Guild first.

“Hm.”

We had collected a lot of materials on the road from Bulbola, and needed information about the local dungeon too. I doubted you could just waltz in and out of them without permission, but since we had a letter signed by Klimt, Guildmaster of the Adventurer's Guild in Alessa, getting an entry permit shouldn't be too hard.

Fran, get your letter of introduction ready.

“Hm.”

Fran took a letter out of her Pocket Dimension.

“Found it.”

Not that one. Get the one Klimt gave you.

Fran had taken out the letter of recommendation given to her by the Bulbolan Guildmaster, Gammod. It was an invitation which allowed her to participate in the auction in the royal capital in June. Gammod had written it after discovering we couldn't get our wage's worth in crystals.

The auction in question dealt exclusively in crystals, so we were sure to find many interesting specimens there.

“This one?” Fran produced the right letter this time.

Yep.

Letter in hand, we asked for directions and arrived after a ten-minute walk.

The Adventurer’s Guild was located smack in the middle of the city and looked like a shrine. Ulmutt had two dungeons, so it was only fitting that the guildhouse was appropriately large. It was a three-story building, and over 1,500 meters wide. While the Ulmutt guild wasn’t equipped with dedicated research facilities and office areas like the one in Bulbola, it was far larger than the one in Alessa.

The entrance is huge, too.

“Hm. About the same as Bulbola.”

The Bulbola guild might have been taller, but what the Ulmutt guild lacked in height, it more than made up for in scale. The reception area was the biggest we’d seen, with twenty counters lined next to each other. Every one of them was packed with adventurers.

So much activity.

“Hm. There’s so many people here.”

“Woof.”

Ulmutt wasn’t called the Dungeon City for nothing. The place was crawling with adventurers. The tournament might have contributed, but even without it, this place probably had a higher concentration of adventurers than Bulbola.

We joined the shortest line, and the man in front of us turned around to look. He was bald, and I couldn’t tell whether he was an adventurer or a bandit. Were we going to

get into a fight already? I readied Telekinesis to prepare for an incoming fist.

“Hey, kid. This is the E-Rank queue.”

But all he did was tell us where we were.

“The lines are divided by rank?”

“Yeah. I’m only gonna say this once—”

The man was blunt, but he gave us a quick explanation on how the counters worked. They were divided by adventurer rank, starting from the farthest: G, F, E, D, C, and so on. Each rank had four counters.

Fran listened to his explanation and made her way to the neighboring D-Rank line.

“Kid, you’re not listening. That over there’s D-Rank.”

“Hm?”

“I said, that’s the D-Rank queue. The low-rank lines are over there.”

Tough as he looked, the man might actually have a soft spot for kids. He sounded like someone trying to help a lost child in a shopping center. Maybe that was how they treated kids in Ulmutt? There were quite a few young adventurers here. The veterans must’ve been used to looking after them.

“That’s why I’m standing here.”

“What?”

“I’m D-Rank.”

“You’re a what?!”

The man wasn’t the only one who did a double take. Other adventurers turned to Fran with a look of surprise.

“Really? You are?”

One of the members of the party in front of us turned around. She looked to be around twenty years old.

Wait, was this girl a Black Cat?

Fran, is she one of yours?

Hm.

Fran nodded.

This was my first encounter with a Black Cat adventurer aside from Fran. They were known as the weakest of the beast tribes, and their inability to evolve made them the subject of ridicule. I thought it was amazing how Fran persisted despite that.

“Huh? Hey, we’re the same!”

“Hm.”

The girl gasped. This was probably her first time seeing a mid-rank Black Cat adventurer, too. She broke into a smile. Fran was more reserved, but I could tell she was happy.

“So tell me, are you really a D-Rank?”

“See for yourself.” Fran took out her Guild Card.

“It’s true... Wow!” The young woman was agape with awe. There was a hint of vexation in her voice, though she mostly just sounded astonished. “Are you looking for a way to evolve too?”

“Of course.”

“I’m so happy to see another Black Cat trying to achieve the same thing! My name is Inina.”

“Fran.”

“Oh... I can’t believe you’re a higher rank than I am. And at your age! I’m still in E-Rank.”

“I thought this was the D-Rank line?”

“Well, *I’m* still an E-Rank, but my party is D-Rank. Here, I’ll introduce you.” Inina introduced the men in front of her one-by-one. “This is Lest, our leader; Channum, the shield

tank; Galian, the mage; Solus, the scout; and Caillou, the swordsman.”

“Hey there. I’m Lest, leader of the D-Rank party, the Hatchery.”

Lest, Channum, and Galian were D-Rank. Solus and Inina were E-Rank, while Caillou was an F-Rank. The D-Ranks looked around thirty. The others were probably in their early twenties, although Solus and Caillou could have still been in their teens.

The Hatchery, as the party was apparently called, was dedicated to the education and training of low-rank adventurers. Its members changed regularly, aside from the three D-Ranks who were its pillars. Joining the Hatchery allowed low-rank adventurers to finish quests a lot faster. Many of the D-Ranks in town owed their rank to the Hatchery, and still paid the party proper respect. They weren’t the only party dedicated to the training of new adventurers either. It seemed fitting that the town with two dungeons would have a lot of support groups for beginners.

“That’s great.”

“I wouldn’t say so. We’re only doing this because the GM insisted. It’s our job.”

“Don’t say that! I’m really grateful for your help! Getting into a party is so hard as a Black Cat, but you took me in anyway, Lest.”

“It’s not about race, it’s about motivation.”

Man, this Lest guy. He looked scary, but he was actually pretty chivalrous.

“Do you run solo, Fran?”

“Hm.”

“Wow, and I thought you were strong before! You’re younger than me, but you might be my role model!” Inina

said, happily patting her role model on the head. She was definitely treating Fran like a child. Not that I minded, since Fran was clearly enjoying the compliments. "Tell me if you run into any problems. We Black Cats have to look out for each other!"

"Thanks."

"Remember, I'm still older than you! We'll definitely need to work together to achieve the Dream of the Tribe."

"The Dream of the Tribe?" Caillou asked.

"Evolution," Inina answered him eagerly. "Black Cats have been made fools of because none of us have managed it. But there has to be a way."

"Hm. We'll get there for sure."

"Yeah! One day, no one will be able to say a bad word about the Black Cats!" It was clear that Inina didn't want to be the only Black Cat to evolve. She might prioritize her own evolution, but she intended to figure it out for the entirety of the tribe. "Let's do our best, Fran. Put 'er there!"

"Yeah."

Inina and Fran raised their fists together. They were already friends.

We were conversing with the Hatchery when an angry voice came from behind us. "Hey, why don't you stop lying and tell the truth!"

Lest and his crew were kind enough to believe Fran was D-Rank, but there would always be skeptics.

"But I *am* telling the truth." Fran was annoyed at this newcomer for interrupting her time with Inina.

"How can a kid like you be a D-Rank?!"

"You're a kid too."

For once, an actual child was the one doubting Fran's abilities.

"I-I'm fifteen!"

The boy blushed and glared at Fran. He had red hair and the shape of his face was less stern than adorable.

"I bet that card's a fake!"

"It's real."

"Y-you're lying!"

"It's real." Fran shoved her guild card in the boy's face, but he refused to believe it.

"It has to be fake! I'm still in G-Rank, so there's no way!"

The boy made up his mind that Fran was lying. It was a bitter pill for him to swallow. But what should we do with him? We couldn't just beat him up. I felt kind of sorry for him.

Teacher, do I blow him away?

Wait, hang on.

What? Why?

Fran was no ageist when it came to taking down people who annoyed her. She treated middle-aged drunks and teenage boys with equal disdain. Actually, this was probably her blanket approach to older men in general. She was probably also extra-hostile because he'd interrupted her conversation with Inina.

He's clearly an immature kid. You shouldn't beat on him.

So what should we do?

Hmm.

Maybe we could silence him with a bit of wind magic. No, he'd immediately start yammering again once the spell wore off. We'd only be adding fuel to the fire.

As it turned out, though, we didn't need to cast any spells.

"Oh, what is all the noise about?"

A new voice sounded from inside the guild, and someone stepped onto the stage. The guildhall fell quiet. The deep and rowdy voices of the male adventurers fell to a hushed silence as they straightened their backs.

"Oh, Elza," Inina whispered.

"Are you arguing again? What am I going to do with you naughty children?"

The entire guildhall was silent. Fran stared openly, clearly utterly taken aback. I understood how she felt; Elza was quite a sight to behold.

"E-Elza."

"Yuri, dearest, are you the cause of all this ruckus?"

"Uh...no, there was a child playing around in the guildhall and I just warned her, that's all." Yuri, the lad who'd been picking on Fran, immediately stood at attention as he answered Elza's question.

"A child? Really? How adorable!"

"..."

Fran.

"..."

Oh no, she'd frozen. Fran couldn't hear me at all.

Fran!

"Huh? Sorry, the shock got to me."

You all right?

"Nice to meet you, dear. My name's Elza."

"...Fran."

"Frannie then? Hello!"

"Hm. One question."

"Yes?"

"Are you a guy or a girl?"

The person called Elza lifted a muscled arm, and placed a finger on their lips. With a wink and a smooch, they blew a kiss to Fran.

Yikes! I'm getting goosebumps! And I'm a sword!

"That's for me to know and for you to find out. Teehee."

They walked, no, strutted their way over to us. I didn't know where to start with Elza. Their voluminous red hair was done up in an afro. They were made-up in thick blush and eyeshadow, accompanied with purple-red lipstick. There were thick muscles beneath their leather armor, accentuated by pink tights. They were too swole to pull off this look!

The mace slung over their back only made Elza look even more terrifying.

Name: Bardische

Age: 47

Race: Human

Class: Vajra

Level: 50/99

HP: 580; Magic: 129; Strength: 355; Agility: 148

Skills: Transport 3; Environmental Resistance 5; Terror 4; Vigilance 5; Cosmetics 6; Punch Arts 5;

Punch Mastery 5; Breath Control 5; Regeneration 5; Weaving 3; Advanced Staff Arts 1; Advanced Staff Mastery 4; Abnormal Status Resistance 6; Mental Status Resistance 3; Quarterstaff Arts 10; Quarterstaff Mastery 10; Provoke 5; Intuition 6; Aesthetics 5; Cooking 3; Alchemy 3; Steel Body; Dull Pain; Transmute Pain; Berserk

Class Skill: Resistance Proficiency

Titles: Surpasser of Pain; Protector of Ulmutt

Equipment: Protector's Mace; Crimson Leopard Leather Armor; Pink Silk Innerwear; Venus Sandals; Charm Earrings

Where do I begin? How about their name: It wasn't Elza, it was Bardische! But the thing most worth mentioning was one skill in particular.

Transmute Pain: Upon receiving damage, transforms pain into pleasure.

That was the best skill a masochist could ask for. I wondered if there was a sadistic version of it where you got stat boosts from hurting your target. Also—a drag queen *and* a masochist? I'd run into a lot of exceptionally unique people on my travels, but Elza might be the most memorable yet.

I realized then that I had broken my promise to be more careful about using Identify. But what was I supposed to do when faced with such a unique character?

"A Black Cat girl with a sword... You were the one that got into an argument outside the city gates, weren't you?"

"Hm."

"Goodness me, you're so cute."

"Hm?"

"So cute that I almost forgot why I'm here. The GM told me to look for you."

The GM? Did the Guildmaster know who we were? Word about the scuffle outside the gates must have spread.

"Will you come with me?"

"The GM?"

"Yes, he sounded like he had something to discuss with you. You have time, don't you?"

I didn't think the scuffle had been enough for the Guildmaster to take interest in...but we couldn't refuse a direct invitation.

"Sure."

"Thank you, dearie. I'll be borrowing her for a while."

"Oh, of course."

The boy who'd accused Fran of lying saluted Elza as he walked away. The gesture wasn't fearful either; he might have been intimidated by Elza, but there was a healthy dose of admiration mixed in with it. I didn't know why, yet, but I could tell that the rest of the guildhall felt the same.

The adventurers here genuinely respected Elza.

"Oh, and Yuri? You need to learn how to gauge someone else's strength, honey. Ignorance will get you killed in the dungeons."

"Huh? What?"

"Over here, Frannie."

"See you later, Fran," said Inina. "Let's talk again some time."

"Bye."

Inina waved, and Fran returned her gesture.

We should talk to her again once we got things sorted out here. She might have a lead on how to evolve, and she's a senior Black Cat adventurer.

Fran followed Bardische—

"What did you call me?" Elza asked with a voice full of rage. "I'm sorry, I thought I heard someone call me something unpleasant."

They were practically glaring in my direction. I didn't think I had been found out yet, but still...

"I guess it was just my imagination. Strange. My woman's intuition told me that someone called me by another name. How very strange."

Woman's intuition? So that's what the Intuition skill did? It was so strong! I should only refer to her as Elza from now on.

"Well, c'est la vie. Let's move on."

"Hm."

Elza's sudden burst of anger had intimidated the rest of the guildhall. The tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife, but Fran wasn't the slightest bit bothered. My girl had nerves of steel.

"Duh nuh nuh nuh~"

God, stop wiggling your ass when you walk! I averted my eyes and focused on Fran's back instead.

"Right this way."

Elza led us up the stairs and down into a far room. The door's elegant decoration told us this was the Guildmaster's office. Without bothering to knock, Elza opened the door.

"Guildmaster, I've brought Fran, just like you said."

"Thank you, Elza. I told you we'd meet again soon, Fran."

"Dias?!"

"I'm glad you remembered."

"You're the GM?"

"Yes. Allow me to formally introduce myself. I am Dias, Guildmaster of the Adventurer's Guild at Ulmutt."

He wasn't nobility, but he *was* a Guildmaster. In a city filled with adventurers, it wasn't hard to imagine the Guildmaster having the respect of the local guard. But...that was odd. All the Guildmasters we had run into so far *had* "Guildmaster" in their list of titles, including Klimt and Gammod. Dias was the only one without it. Were there specific requirements to unlocking the title?

As I pondered that, I suddenly gained a deep interest in one of the corners of the room. I thought I saw a shadow, or felt a presence, or...something. I couldn't help but stare at the potted plant to the right of the entrance.

There's nothing there...

Hm.

Fran felt the same, turning her gaze on the innocent-looking houseplant.

"Pleased to meet you."

"!"

One second was all it took. It happened the instant we took our eyes off Dias. The old man was in front of Fran and already shaking her hand. Fran was just as shocked.

“Ugh!”

“Whoa now.”

Fran used her free hand to bat at him, but Dias had already stepped back.

“Did I take you by surprise?”

“What...did you do?”

“There’s no reason to glare. I just wanted to shake your hand.”

The old man acted like a gentleman outside the city, but who was to say it wasn’t an act? He clapped his hands and bowed, looking very much like a mischievous schoolboy.

Fran was angry at being taken off guard, but she wasn’t hurt and he had helped us get here. “Do that again...and I won’t let you off so easy.”

“Now, now. I just find these skills useful as long as I’m in town.”

He probably used his Class Skills, Visual Suggestion and Mental Suggestion. They were much more dangerous than I thought. If this were an actual fight, we would’ve taken a hit.

Fran glared at the grinning Dias as she figured out what had just happened. Elza let out an exasperated sigh. “GM, will you stop picking on our recruits? I’m sorry, honey. He always does this to promising adventurers.”

So it wasn’t the first time Dias had done this and it probably wouldn’t be the last. Was it really okay for him to be Guildmaster?

"If he annoys you, you have my permission to whoop him silly. Got it, Frannie?"

"Got it."

"I hope you get him good. Our GM deserves it."

"That's awful mean of you to say, Elza."

"Well, it's the truth. Just because you can't get fired doesn't mean you get to abuse your power!"

"Why can't he get fired?"

"Several reasons," said Elza. "He's strong for one. I'm a B-Rank myself, but I can't hope to beat our Guildmaster."

Dias was that strong? There wasn't a huge stat difference between the two. The difference must be in their skill usage then. Elza seemed to rely on raw strength, so she must've been weak to more subtle forms of attack.

"Let's just say that he's strong enough to be the Guildmaster of the town with two dungeons," said Elza. "Our GM is also the only one who can negotiate with the Dungeon Masters."

How does that even work?

"Negotiate?"

"Ah, of course. You're new in town, Frannie." Elza elaborated: "Ulmutt is famous for having unconquered dungeons right in the midst of it."

"Very dangerous."

"It would be, under normal circumstances. But Ulmutt is different."

"How so?"

"Put simply, we've managed to forge a deal with the Dungeon Masters. They don't power up the monsters too much or allow them to spill over into town, and we agree not

to destroy their dungeon cores in exchange. If there are any materials the outside world needs, they arrange it for us.”

So Dungeon Masters *could* be negotiated with, provided they were intelligent enough. They must’ve realized that coexistence was better than being annihilated.

“Our Guildmaster struck the deal with them in his youth.”

“It wasn’t easy, I remember that much.”

“I don’t know how this geezer did it, but the Dungeon Masters trust him enough to be their middleman, so who knows what would happen if he quit his job. Since Ulmutt is built upon those dungeons, he’s become indispensable.”

“Heh. That means I’m free to do whatever I want!”

“Guildmaster, no!”

They went at it like a mischievous little boy and his overbearing mother.

“*Huff.* Anyway, I should be going.”

“Thank you for your hard work, Elza.”

“I only wish you’d make it easier for me.”

But I guess they got along in their own way.

“Catch you later, Frannie. I must say, I’ve taken quite a liking to you. Feel free to call me anytime you need help. Heehee.”

“Hm.” Fran just waved goodbye. Her initial shock had been mostly out of confusion.

“Buh-bye. Mwah!”

Elza blew a kiss as she left. I instinctively tried to dodge.

What’s wrong, Teacher? I felt you move just now.

I-I’m fine. Don’t worry about it.

The Guildmaster sighed as Elza left the room. "She's a good person, I assure you. Are you all right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Elza can be a little intense for newcomers. Some people like her, others not so much. You must admit she's a little...idiosyncratic."

"She's a guy, but also a girl?"

"That's one way of putting it, yes."

"Does she have other quirks?"

"You're going to deal with her a lot, so I might as well tell you. I fear for my life if she ever sinks her venomous fangs into you. That woman terrifies anyone she deals with..." Dias muttered with a grave expression. "You see, Elza loves both men and women, and her tastes in age are as flexible as her taste in gender. She also quite enjoys taking a bit of punishment."

...???

"Are you following all this, Fran?"

So Elza was a bisexual, genderqueer drag queen, and possibly a cougar too? *And* a masochist?

Teacher, do you know what he's talking about?

Uh, kind of. You don't have to get it yet, Fran. It's okay.

Why not?

It's grown-up business. You're too young to understand. Elza's a little strange. Let's leave it at that.

Hm. Got it.

Phew, that was close. I didn't think I could handle explaining it all to Fran.

"Elza loves children with all her heart, and would never allow any harm to come to them. And she'd never do

anything untoward. But she *is* the ace of the Ulmutt Guild, and a lot of our younger members look up to her,” Dias continued. “By the by—a certain someone asked me to keep an eye on you. And she has made it clear that Elza is not to scoop you up...or else.”

“A certain someone?”

“Yes. I’m sure you’re acquainted with Amanda the Hariti?” Dias smiled wryly. “And I quote: ‘Fran is so cute that she stands out from the rest of the crowd. I’m sure the other adventurers are going to pick on her! You better do something about it, got it?! And I know for a fact that Elza’s going to like her, too, so you better keep an eye on her at all times! Or else!’ End quote. She and Elza get along well enough, but you know how protective Amanda gets.”

Dias imitated Amanda’s feminine gestures as he quoted her verbatim. That really was something Amanda would say, though the old man’s impression of a spry elf woman was hard to watch.

“There’s someone else I should warn you about.”

“Who?”

“Baron Seldio Lesseps. The man you scuffled with outside the city. He belongs to a family of marquises and is also an A-Rank adventurer.”

So he *was* nobility. Was he that seriously that strong though? I hadn’t felt anything like that sort of power from him; but then again, we’d met A-Ranks in the past who didn’t exactly emanate powerful auras.

Fran had the same doubts. “Him?”

“Heehee. Yes. Deplorable as it may seem, he is an A-Rank.”

“How come?”

“Put simply, he used money and connections. He’s barely a B-Rank in terms of strength. Honestly, he’s about as strong as an upper-level C-Rank,” Dias scoffed. It looked like he disliked Seldio as much as we did. “And that’s not all. There are a lot of unpleasant rumors doing the rounds about that man. I suggest you stay away.”

“All right.”

We would’ve avoided him even if Dias hadn’t asked us to, really. Fran didn’t want anything to do with a man who’d tried to take me away from her.

“Just ignore him and run if it comes to it. I’ll cover for you if I have to. Amanda absolutely despises him, and she’d have my hide if she knew I let you run into him. Now, if you’ll allow me, I would like to move on to more serious matters.”

Dias rested his elbows on the table and folded his hands. What could be more important than his warning about Seldio?

“That’s no ordinary sword, is it?”

Wha—

The old Guildmaster fixed his gaze directly on me. There was no doubt that I was the sword in question. But what could he mean? No ordinary sword?

“Hm. It’s an enchanted blade.”

Good answer.

Magic swords were common enough in the grand scheme of things, but they definitely weren’t ordinary. But Dias shook his head.

“Yes, I can tell that it’s a magic weapon. But there is something unique about this particular one, isn’t there?”

“Hmm...”

Had he really found me out?

"Heehee," Dias said, seeing Fran bite her lip in caution. "I see you're wondering how I found out. How about you identify me again?"

"?"

"Go on. No tricks, I promise."

I might as well humor his request. He'd asked us to do it, and I really wanted to know how he figured out what I was.

I identified Dias again.

Teacher?

Hey...those skills weren't there before.

His stats and skill levels remained the same, but there were two additional skills listed now: Fake Identity and Mind Read. Both of them were Level 8. The titles Guildmaster and A-Rank Adventurer were added to his title list as well.

I told Fran of my findings.

"Can you see it?"

"Hm. Fake Identity and Mind Read. I can see your titles too."

"Correct! Do you know what Fake Identity does?"

"Hm."

"While you *can* use it to hide your true stat values, I personally use it to hide my titles for added privacy. There's no better way to conceal my identity. I'm quite famous around these parts, you know." An A-Rank Guildmaster would attract attention anywhere. "As for Mind Read, that's my ace in the hole."

As if his mastery of misdirection wasn't enough... Dias couldn't ask for a better skill. I finally understood the real

danger of Fake Identity. You let your opponent Identify you and lull him into a false sense of security about your skills. And then, you struck. Innocuous as it was, the skill could easily turn the tide of battle.

"I can't tell you how many times I've used Mind Read and Skill Amnesia to outsmart my enemies. Things would be easier if I had Identify, but I don't have the talent. I just can't get the hang of it. Granted, equipment and spells are simple enough to observe with the naked eye, whereas there aren't many people who can use their skills without thinking about it. That's where Mind Read comes in handy."

I understood that much, but I read the skill's description anyway.

Mind Read: Faintly reads a target's thoughts.

Which meant he could easily read my thoughts. Was that how he noticed?

"Hahaha. You're panicking. I see you've noticed what Mind Read does. Yes, that is how I noticed that the sword on your back had a mind of its own."

"!"

Crap, he's going to read my mind again!

"Although I must admit that it was pure luck that I found out. I thought you were talking to your wolf last night, but I knew that wasn't the case when we almost came to blows. That sword of yours told you to stop."

Damn it. There was no hiding it now. He had us figured out. Was that why he asked to see Fran personally?

"Now, will you please tell me the identity of your sword?"

What do we do?

Hmm. He's already figured me out, and refusing to cooperate wouldn't do us any favors...

He didn't have any concrete evidence. Fran could still deny her way out of this. I didn't know what Dias was after. What if he wanted to take me for himself?

"Hahaha. I see you don't trust me. I swear on Amanda's name that I mean no harm to you, or the sword. I owe her big time, and she'll have my head if I try anything funny. Besides, I showed you the best skill in my repertoire. Won't you please return the favor?" Dias said, wearing an innocent smile.

He wasn't lying, but...

Well, there was nothing I could do now. If we were staying in this city, then we might as well get on the Guildmaster's good side. We had no chance of talking our way out of this treacherous old man's accusations anyway.

May I?

Hm. Can't be helped.

The worst possible person had to be the one to find out.

You got me.

"Oh? That voice..."

Yeah. I'm Fran's sword.

Dias leapt out of his seat, clearly surprised.

"Well, this is fantastic! I knew you had a will of your own, but I wasn't expecting to be able to converse with you. You have the eloquence of a human!"

"Hm. Teacher's the best."

"Teacher?"

We went through our usual song and dance. I explained the circumstances behind my christening, heavily implying Dias should compliment Fran on her excellent naming sense. Master of subtlety that he was, Dias got the hint and lavished Fran with praise. He almost laid it on a little too thick.

So, was there anything you wanted from me, or was it pure curiosity?

“Excuse me, this is my first time meeting an Intelligent Weapon. My excitement almost made me forget my reason for talking to you. I wanted to give you some advice.”

“Advice?”

“You haven’t leveled up your detection skills much, have you? I suspect you’re not used to using them either.”

What makes you say that?

“Because you’ve been completely oblivious to the fact that I’ve been using my skills. Mind Read, Visual Suggestion, Mental Suggestion, all of them. Granted, I’m an expert at concealment. But even then, you’re far too careless. You’ve been focusing on your hard-hitting skills, but that leaves your flank exposed. The difference between your combat skills and detection skills have created an imbalance. If you were more balanced, you should be able to sense me.”

He was right. We hadn’t leveled up our detection skills with the same amount of dedication.

“I suppose it’s all right if you have nothing to hide, like Elza, but I suspect the two of you want to be better than that.”

You’re right. My existence is the biggest secret of all.

“Allow me to make a proposition. I know of a place where you can train your detection skills. All you need to do is investigate it.”

Investigate? Do you mean one of the dungeons?

“Correct. I trust you know of Ulmutt’s two dungeons?”

“Hm.”

“The West Dungeon is aimed at beginners, while the East Dungeon is suitable for veterans. There aren’t many traps in the West Dungeon, and the monsters that spawn there tend to attack you directly—perfect for beginners who want to gain their first few levels. In contrast, the East Dungeon is littered with traps, and the monsters there aren’t shy about ambushing adventurers. The lower levels are home to even stronger creatures, and it isn’t rare for D-Ranks to perish there.”

So you’re telling us to train in the East Dungeon.

“Exactly. You should be able to sharpen your detection skills there. How about it? You won’t instantly gain a ton of levels, but I promise your experience won’t go to waste. Usually, one would need to go through the West Dungeon to enter the East, but I can issue a special permit for you.”

Why are you doing all this? I didn’t think it was out of the kindness of his heart.

“Hahaha. No tricks, I promise. It’s for the good of the Adventurer’s Guild.”

“What does my exploring the East Dungeon have to do with the guild?”

“Because if you explored the West Dungeon, the fight you got into outside the city gates would happen again. It’s full of low-ranked adventurers, you see. They can’t tell how strong you are, and will definitely have some choice words for you. I guarantee it.”

The tournament attracted a huge number of adventurers from far and wide, which meant there would

definitely be some idiots in the mix. It was in the guild's best interests for Fran to not start a riot.

"There aren't that many adventurers in the East Dungeon, and the ones that *are* there are strong enough to judge what you are. The guild will also tell them to leave you alone."

Which is why you're telling us to skip West and head right to East.

"Mutually beneficial, wouldn't you say?"

What do you say, Fran?

"I don't mind."

"Good. I can see you're motivated too."

Dias had clearly anticipated that we would cooperate. He rummaged through his desk, took out a special permit for the East Dungeon, and slid it over to Fran. Her name was already on it. The old man was prepared.

I wasn't suspicious of Dias, but I couldn't bring myself to completely trust him either.

Check to see if there's any fine print.

"Hm."

Fran took the permit and inspected it closely for anything suspicious. She turned it, flipped it upside down, and even held it up to the light just in case there was holographic ink.

"Is something the matter?"

"Just checking to see if this thing's rigged."

"That's an awful thing to say right to my face. It's safe, I promise."

"..."

Dias laughed as he denied her accusation, but Fran kept her suspicious gaze on him. The old man seemed to finally notice her mistrust, and started sweating a little. "Please believe me. I promise I won't pull any more pranks on you, Fran."

"..."

"R-really! I only play tricks on my adventurers if it's for their own good."

"What do you mean?"

"It's my job to remind the youngsters that they must never let their guard down. I swear it's not for my own entertainment."

"Uh-huh."

As composed as Dias usually was, even he faltered under Fran's cold stare. "I suppose...it's partly for my own entertainment."

"Hm."

"I know! I'll throw in some other perks, and you don't even have to finish exploring the East Dungeon to enjoy them!"

Dias was clearly trying to change the subject now. We should hear him out.

Other perks?

"Yes. Three come to mind."

Three? That's a lot.

"First, I'll put out an order for the protection of underage adventurers. You've noticed the young adventurers in this town, Fran?"

"Hm."

“We have two dungeons in this city, but only one of them is E-Rank. G- and F-Rank adventurers are allowed to explore the upper levels of the dungeon, provided they team up with an E-Rank or greater. That’s why a lot of low-ranks flock to this town. It’s the only dungeon in the country where a G-Rank is allowed to explore higher than his rank allows.”

“That’s why there are a lot of G-Rank kids here?”

“Yes. Although there are also awful people who trick the kids into being bait.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Indeed. An adventurer takes responsibility for his own life, yes, but that doesn’t mean you should take advantage of innocent children. I’ve been thinking of ways we could regulate such behavior. Maybe institute a punishment.”

Now that Fran’s here, you think it’s time for such punishment.

“Precisely.”

“What are the other two perks?”

“Second, I’ll spread a rumor that you’ve become one of Elza’s favorites. There isn’t an adventurer in Ulmutt who would go against her.”

We saw the effect Elza had on the local adventurers firsthand. It was enough to silence the guildhall.

“What’s the last one?”

“I’ll increase your rank immediately.”

“?”

Meaning?

“Fran, your accomplishments haven’t gone unnoticed by the guild. All you need to do is turn in a few more quests to meet the formal requirements for C-Rank.”

“Shocking.”

This was news to me too. Had word about what we did in Bulbola reached the powers that be?

“Of particular note is your acting as a bodyguard for the royal family of an allied kingdom. Your clients wouldn’t stop singing your praises.”

The bodyguard job we took from Fult and Satya seemed to be the clincher. Fran couldn’t have asked for a better review. She had the unfair advantage of being personal friends with the royal twins, but we appreciated the kind words nonetheless.

Upon hearing she was on the cusp of reaching a new rank, Fran’s eyes lit up, and with it the quiet fire of her fighting spirit.

“I’ll work really hard.”

She clenched her fists and squinted her eyes in determination, a gesture only I and Jet could discern.

“It’s best that you do. When an adventurer is promoted to C-Rank in Ulmutt, their name is broadcast throughout the entire town. There’ll be fewer adventurers who come to you looking for trouble, once they know.”

Not that that would reduce the number to zero. A lot of folks wouldn’t be happy about a child reaching C-Rank before they did. Still, the fewer people came after us, the better.

“I’ll give you some quests you can finish in the East Dungeon. Do them, and you’ll rank up straight away,” Dias said, showing her around thirty contracts.

Like the East Dungeon permit, Dias had prepared these beforehand. The old man was prepared for every eventuality. If this were our first time meeting him, he would’ve seemed like a wise, reliable Guildmaster...but thanks to all the

misdirection, I thought he was little more than a shifty old man.

You only get one chance at a first impression.

“To increase your rank, you’ll have to finish twenty-three requests, ranked D or higher. I’ll give you these to start. Just pick the ones that are easiest for you to finish.”

“All right.”

Thanks.

Which reminded me that I’d thought there would be a test before Fran could explore the dungeons. So much for Klimt’s letter of recommendation. Well, Klimt was still a Guildmaster, so it was only good manners to give the letter to Dias.

“Here.”

“What’s this...? This is the seal of the guild in Alessa.”

“A letter of recommendation from Klimt.”

“Yes? From Master Klimt?”

“Hm.”

The second Fran nodded, Dias’s face turned pale. He was almost blue. I began worrying for him.

You okay there, grampa?

“B-by the way, Fran.”

“Hm?”

“You won’t tell Master Klimt about the fact that I startled you, will you?”

He was as meek as a kitten all of a sudden.

“What’s it matter?”

“Yes, well, to be perfectly honest, I owe an infinite debt of gratitude to Master Klimt for taking care of me in my early

adventuring days. I still consider him my superior.”

I activated Essence of Falsehood. He didn’t seem to be lying; Dias really was terrified of Klimt. Good thing we hadn’t thrown that letter away. Who knew it would end up becoming our trump card?

“Any more funny business and I’ll tell Amanda and Klimt on you.”

“Yes. I apologize. I’ll never do it again.”

The Guildmaster’s desperate apology was quite a sight to behold. Shame there were no cameras in this world. At least Dias would put an end to his unwanted tricks now.

Fran puffed up her chest, holding Klimt’s letter in the air while Dias bowed his head. It looked like the concluding scene of a story.

Before we left the Guildmaster’s office, we asked Dias if we’d be able to sense an enemy’s skill use after improving our detection skills.

“It depends. For example, Identify is very difficult to sense, let alone detect. I was only able to sense it because of Identify Sense. The same applies for Connoisseur and other perception-type skills. On the other hand, Mental Suggestion and Skill Amnesia are very difficult to conceal. Even at my level, I need to use some sort of diversion if I don’t want my target to sense it.”

Identify and Connoisseur only allowed you to view information, but if that information was vital, it could have profound implications. Mental Suggestion, on the other hand, diverted the target’s attention. There was a world of difference between being looked at and having your mind tugged in a certain direction.

Applied to my own skills, Identify and Essence of Falsehood were hard to detect. Skill Taker, however, would

feel quite apparent to the target.

“Sensing Identify without the Identify Sense is possible, though it requires sizable training. Diversion skills don’t take as much practice to detect.”

Got it. Thanks for the advice.

“No problem. Now go and train to your heart’s content.”

“Hm. See you around.”

“Indeed. And do send my regards to Master Klimt if you see him again.”

Dias sent us off with the deepest respect for his old master. And with that, we left his office.

We should learn more about the dungeon in the guild library.

“Hm.”

Just a quick look will do. We don’t have much time left today.

We still needed to figure out where to stay before the sun set, and there was one person we wanted to look for in particular.

I wonder if Garrus is still in town.

We strolled around the city of Ulmutt, looking for old Garrus.

We’d parted with the dwarven blacksmith in Alessa, and he should’ve reached Ulmutt long before us. We’d suffered through a lot of detours. It was obvious Garrus had already arrived from the fact that a lot of the equipment in town bore his signature craftsmanship, but when we asked the adventurers where they got their gear, they all named different shops. It sounded like Garrus offered his services to a number of different places.

We visited some of these shops, listening to town gossip from the local adventurers. They were mostly talking about the tournament and dungeon exploration, and not a single word was mentioned about the old blacksmith. But one story from a three-man party stood out.

“An Evilist fortress fell overnight? And you’re saying it’s the Millennium Fortress? That’s the strongest fort those Evil One worshippers had.”

“That’s not the only place they congregate, you know. Rumor has it some of them have been blessed by the Evil One himself.”

“He can do that? I only thought criminals and crazies worshipped him.”

“Not that I’ve met one myself, but they say those Corrupt Goblins and Kobolds have been touched by the Evil One too.”

“Would hate to run into a souped-up Evilist, I’ll tell you what. Maybe one of the kingdoms will finally get rid of them.”

“But the Millennium Fortress is in Raydoss. Those guys are more inclined to use the Evilists, rather than destroying them outright.”

“So who killed them?”

“Who knows? One of the underlings ran into an acquaintance of mine, and he said there was a traitor in their ranks. One of the higher-ups had just returned to their base and it was him who started the slaughter. He went into a berserker rage and started killing his companions, cackling, ‘Feed me with your strength!’ He sounded like a monster.”

“Yikes, really?”

“Sounds like a ghost story!”

“Well, it actually happened. Although it might be embellished by the rumor mill.”

I was surprised to hear that the Evilists had a fortress, but I was even more surprised to learn that fortress had already fallen. And the one who destroyed it came from their own ranks?

Are they talking about Theraclede?

You think so, too, Fran?

Killing his friends for power sounded like Theraclede’s standard practice. Maybe if we let him do his thing, he would annihilate all the Evilists for us. Then all we’d have to do was kill him, although God only knows how strong he would be at that point.

Grrr, Jet growled. He sounded eager to settle the score.

We’ll get him someday, Fran echoed.

Having escaped our clutches in Bulbola, he and Zelyse were clearly on Fran’s kill list.

We will. But we have to get stronger first.

Hm.

Woof!

We walked about the town, picking up any rumors we heard. On our third stop, we finally got a lead on Garrus. The shopkeeper was a dwarven blacksmith just like him.

“He’s not in town anymore?”

“Not since he heard what happened in Bulbola. He set off a few days ago, saying he needed to do something about it. He said he should be back before the tournament. Just hang around and you’ll see him again.”

“All right.”

“Garrus told me about you. So that’s his Named Gear... It’s a work of art.”

The blacksmith’s eyes gleamed as he admired Fran’s Black Cat Gear. He stared at her armor, but it looked like he was ogling the little girl wearing it. Passersby looked at the man with unsettled expressions, while others outright glared at him. I wondered if one of them would call the town guard.

Five minutes later, the man was finally satisfied. He smiled and thanked us.

“It really is an inspiration to behold. As thanks, feel free to visit me for gear maintenance. I’ll give you a discount. I have some dungeon-crawling essentials for sale too.”

While he’s being generous, ask him if he knows of any good inns.

“Hm. Know a good place to stay?”

“You don’t have a room yet? There’s this place called Sword in the Ground. Highly recommended. Serves great ale to boot.”

Such were dwarven priorities. I doubted if a rowdy alehouse would make for a good night’s sleep.

“The pub’s underground, so the noise is perfectly isolated.”

“Thanks. I’ll check it out.”

“No problem. You come again now.”

“Hm.”

We made our way to the inn and found that the façade was more refined than I expected. Fran peeked inside. It had an atmosphere more like a lounge than a rowdy bar. There was a separate dining hall which didn’t serve alcohol, which must’ve helped with the noise levels. We wouldn’t have to worry about nightly roughhousing.

Fran's room was clean, and the bed was soft and fluffy. Furthermore, Jet was allowed in for an added price, provided he was in his miniature size. This was the best inn we'd stayed in so far.

"Hm. Not bad."

"Woof."

Fran and Jet liked it as much as I did. She wasted no time in leaping onto the bed.



So, what now?

"Dungeon."

"Arf arf!"

It was nice to see them motivated. We needed to finish some quests anyway, and I had already learned about the dungeon.

Let's sort out the quest files before we go.

"Oh yeah."

We laid the documents out on the bed. Was it really okay for Fran to be taking on all these quests at once? If anyone else knew about it, they could make a decent case for favoritism.

Fran, don't tell anyone else about these quests.

"Hm."

That said, about half of them were extermination requests. The other half asked us to collect materials.

I've never heard any of these monsters before.

"Hm."

If I remember correctly, they should start spawning from the tenth floor down.

"Can't wait."

Low-rank adventurers weren't even allowed down to where the D-Rank quests were located. In the East Dungeon, F-Ranks were only allowed up to the ninth level.

Phantom Dogs and Dark Stalkers. These stealthy creatures will make up most of our quarry down there.

Dias was right. The East Dungeon would make excellent training grounds for our sense skills.

Filing through the paperwork took time, and Fran and Jet were clearly bored. I didn't mind remembering these

details, but Fran needed to learn that gathering information was part of being an adventurer. I could only hope that she would improve her tenacity with tedium.

She did manage to put up with an hour of sorting through paperwork before tapping out, though. Last time we tried this, she lasted all of five minutes.

Well, let's get going.

"Hold on. We can't go yet."

What's that? Did she want to process more information?

"We haven't had lunch."

"Woof!"

Right. Of course.

Chapter 2: Dungeon Crawling

FRAN AND JET finished their meals and immediately headed to the East Dungeon. The food in the cafeteria was pretty good, enough to earn satisfied grunts from Fran and Jet as they went to get fifths.

We asked the lady of the inn for directions to the dungeon, and her explanation was very simple.

“Head to the West Garrison for the West Dungeon, and to the East Garrison for the East Dungeon. You can’t miss it.”

Ulmutt’s dungeons were housed in the large cylindrical structures we saw from the outside of town. The garrisons were made specifically to enclose the dungeons inside.

“How come?”

“We’re all used to the dungeons now, but back in the day no one believed the Guildmaster had actually struck a deal with the Dungeon Masters.”

Fair enough.

To ordinary civilians, Dungeon Masters were a source of pain and unrest. The majority of people were skeptical of Dias’s claims that he had come to an agreement with them. To placate the growing unrest, the kingdom of Granzell installed the garrisons as a failsafe. Even if the Dungeon Masters betrayed Ulmutt, they could stem the flow of monsters at the source.

The thick city walls served the same purpose. Even if the beasts managed to overcome the garrisons, they still had layers of fortification to break through. The citizens of

Granzell could rest easy, but what about the local Ulmuttites? Their town was under constant threat.

The lady of the inn explained that the locals were quite pleased to have two dungeons within walking distance. Many Ulmuttites were adventurers and merchants who moved here after the dungeons were discovered.

“Ulmutt has always been a hotspot for dungeon crawlers. They were ecstatic to have guards stationed nearby. It made dungeon crawling a lot safer.”

The locals came to Ulmutt precisely *because* of its dungeons. After all, they were their main source of livelihood. They probably thought they’d lucked out when the government paid for thick city walls.

Ulmutt was a gathering place of reckless adventurers and ruthless merchants, all of them strong in their own right.

“Can’t wait.”

Same.

I’d never seen a garrison up close before. With the East Garrison in her sight, Fran made her way toward it. The way there wasn’t as straightforward as I thought. I don’t think the architects of Ulmutt’s early years ever heard of city planning. The streets were like a maze. The closer we got to the garrison, the more winding the roads became. The closest districts were the oldest in the city, and the age showed. Buildings and shops were thrown up free from any housing laws, which made for chaotic-looking neighborhoods.

There were hills, dead ends, overpasses. We wandered the streets for about an hour.

“Is this it?”

“Arf?”

Looks like it. We just need to go through that small gate and we should be at the entrance.

The garrison was even more overwhelming up close. At this distance, I could tell that this was no ordinary fort. Its singular gate was tiny, even without a moat. There were no windows, either. I suppose it didn't need any to contain whatever was inside.

Soldiers were stationed at the upper levels, ready for any emergency. A small guardhouse functioned as the dungeon's reception, and ten adventurers were already in line. The two parties were waiting for their turn.

Let's join the line.

"Hm."

We still stood out from the crowd. The adventurers in front of us turned to look at Fran and gauge her abilities. However, none of them said anything. Most of the crawlers in East Dungeon were D-Rank and above, and they all felt that Fran was no ordinary beastgirl.

Jet was huge too. Literally. He'd returned to his original size as insect repellent and the intimidation he gave off worked wonders. Even the most boorish of adventurers would think twice before messing with a giant wolf. His only weakness was tight spaces.

"Next...b-big! Big wolf! Really big wolf!"

"H-hey! What's going on out there?!"

The guard at the counter took one look at Jet, screamed, and rolled down the storm shutters. They reminded me of the sellers' carts in front of train stations back on Earth. His friends couldn't see Jet past the shutters. When they rolled them back up, Jet's sudden appearance shocked them all over again.

"Oh, s-sorry! I got scared for a second there."

“Please excuse this dumbass, little lady.”

The guard apologized profusely, bowing his head. They were much more polite than the guards outside the gates. This one was actually sorry. Moreover, they didn't emit any malice or hatred toward Fran. Even she was surprised, enough to be suspicious. She suspected them of plotting something behind her back.

“Hmm...”

“S-so how may I help you?” The guard flinched under the weight of Fran's stare.

“Are you plotting something?” she said.

The sudden insinuation only confused the poor soldier.

“P-plotting?”

“Us?”

“Hm. You're nothing like the guards on the outside.”

“Oh, did you run into trouble out there?”

“Most of our good men have been shipped over to Bulbola, you see.”

“We apologize for any inconvenience our remaining forces may have caused.”

The two guards knew what she was getting at right away, and explained their circumstances while processing Fran's guild card.

Guards stationed in Ulmutt needed to be physically strong enough to patrol the dungeons and deal with rowdy adventurers, meaning a lot of people got the job even if they acted like thugs. They were usually in the minority, however, because Bulbola needed good men, Ulmutt sent its best over to help. The honest soldiers at the core of Ulmutt's forces were away from home, which meant the unruly guardsmen, who were usually in charge of killing monsters

and apprehending criminals, had to work city patrol. It wasn't uncommon for these guards to start trouble all by themselves. The outskirts of the town got the worst of it. These guards were violent and strong enough to be a threat.

"Ulmutt's finest will come back soon enough. Our Guildmaster and high-ranking adventurers have been helping us settle any incidents."

"You should be careful though," one of them warned. "You don't look like an adventurer. I mean, we couldn't believe it until we verified your guild card."

"You might be the youngest person to ever set foot in the East Dungeon."

"All right, that takes care of your registration. I've updated your card to show your completion rate and other details."

He held a round crystal over Fran's guild card. It looked to be some kind of manatech.

"Details?"

"Yeah. Stuff like the monsters you've killed and the level you've reached in the dungeon. You can track your quest progress this way."

That would come in handy. The tracker also made it more difficult to cheat on your quests. Not that it mattered to us. We had no intention of doing so.

"Just keep in mind that you have to get it reset for every dungeon."

"Got it."

"You can have this back now."

The guard returned Fran's guild card. Now we could get dungeon crawling.

Let's go.

Woof!

We'll take it slow to start. There's a lot of traps in this dungeon.

Hm. Got it.

This would be our first time in a high-difficulty dungeon. We just needed to take it slow. The last thing I wanted was for Fran to suffer death by traps.

Jet, since we want to train our detection skills, you don't have to tell us where the traps are unless it's fatal.

Woof.

We left the reception and stood in front of a steel gate two meters high. They *really* didn't want any monsters coming into town.

The guards stationed there pulled a lever, opening the gate. I felt mana flow behind the mechanism.

"Don't go too crazy now."

"Hm. Thanks."

After the short exchange, we walked into the garrison and found ourselves under a stone dome. Tiny holes riddled the walls, no doubt to shoot arrows at incoming monsters. There were barricades inside too, and a ditch dug around the dome to slow down a potential horde. At the center of it all was a small shrine.

Is that the entrance to the dungeon?

"It's tiny."

"Woof."

We walked past the barricades and ditches. Inside the shrine, a stairway led down into the dungeon. It sure was small. Still, its size was not indicative of its danger. We shouldn't let our guard down.

Let's go.

"Hm!"

"Woof!"

We took a collective breath and headed down the stairs. As we carefully navigated our way down, something came to Fran's mind.

"You didn't try to stop me."

From what?

"From being C-Rank. You know I'll stand out."

I guess, but it's a little late to worry about that after everything we've been through, don't you think? You want to sign up for the tournament, too, right?

"Hm."

Then you were bound to stand out sooner or later.

"Yeah. Especially after I win."

Hahaha. Exactly.

"Hm."

We had been avoiding the spotlight so far. Fran was too beautiful to ignore, of course, but we did our best to not draw any attention. My existence was still a closely-guarded secret, and we didn't need any noblemen or politicians poking their noses in, but Fran was quite optimistic about the tournament. She would stand out if she won, but by then people would know not to mess with her.

As we talked, we reached the entrance of the first floor. The stone hallways were still tight, with no indication of ever opening up. There wasn't much height either, forcing Jet to give up on his original size.

"You need practice fighting in that size."

"Woof."

Luminescent moss grew on the cave ceilings and lit up the stony path well enough. The light was too dim to shine into every nook and cranny, but at least we could see the way forward.

The road breaks into three paths here.

"Where should we go?"

Theoretically, we should go left.

The Left Hand Theory of Exploration says that as long as you hug the wall with your left hand, you'll eventually reach your destination. The same applies to your right hand of course. But the theory wasn't flawless. The exit could be hidden behind a trap wall, and there might be staircases or ladders down. We also couldn't rule out the possibility that the exit was in the center of the room.

I had looked up the monsters related to our quests, but completely ignored anything about traps or the layout of this dungeon. There wouldn't be much point in training if we already knew everything. For our exercise to pay off, we had to walk through the dungeon, cautious of monsters and traps.

"We'll go left."

Fran took no time to decide.

Our first run through the dungeon didn't have to be perfect.

Let's see where it goes.

"Hm."

For a few minutes, we didn't sense any traps or monsters.

"Hrmph?"

Oh.

And then we felt something at the same time.

Fran pointed to a crack in the road.

"There's something there."

You noticed it too? That's a Shadow Snake.

The monster laid in a crack, unlit by the bright moss. A black snake coiled in the darkness. Despite being called the Shadow Snake, it lacked the ability to cast Dark Magic. The monster got its name from its habit of waiting in the shadows and biting at unsuspecting heels.

"Trash."

"Woof."

Come on, it's the first thing we've run into all day.

It was the size of a rat snake, with shamefully low attack. Aside from Shadow Meld and Presence Sense, it was a perfectly normal venomless snake. The greatest form of defense was a pair of tough boots. The East Dungeon might be more difficult, but not all its monsters were hideous from the get-go.

The Shadow Snake was not worth fighting. It tasted bad, and its crystal was cruddy. The EXP it offered was miniscule, and gutting the crystal out of its corpse was more trouble than it was worth. But I needed the crystal, so the thing had to die.

Fran took it down in one hit, and it yielded exactly one point of crystal. I didn't feel my usual satisfaction, but still, I couldn't be picky.

All right, let's keep going.

"Oh, there's another."

Nice.

Fran saw two more snakes, their forked tongues flicking in an effort at intimidation. Were there only Shadow Snakes

on this floor? We took care of them in no time and carried on exterminating them until Fran noticed something.

What is it?

"Traps..."

Really? Where?

"There."

Fran pointed to a section of the floor revealed to her by Presence Sense. There was something odd about it. I didn't use Trap Sense a lot, so looking through the information took time. I eventually figured out it shot arrows, triggered by a pressure plate.

I see.

Fran sensed it before me thanks to Sensitive Sole. It allowed her to feel vibrations through her feet. She must've picked up on the irregular vibration.

That ability was practically useless for me. It might work if I came into contact with the ground, but I'd rather not get dragged around by the blade. The noise alone would be awful.

Let's disarm it. You wanna give it a shot, Fran?

"Hm."

I was pretty good at disarming traps with Telekinesis, and could disable even the most dangerous ones from a safe distance. If worse came to worst, I could just trigger them from afar. But Fran needed to get some experience.

Here you go.

"Hm."

I gave her the set of disarmament tools we'd picked up at the Adventurer's Guild. They came with a set of pins, tension wrenches, and adhesives. It was the bread-and-butter kit of the scout classes.

There were multiple ways to disarm traps, but the method Fran used allowed her to render it impotent. She would disarm the trigger mechanism so that the trap would no longer activate. The tile's weight sensor was connected to a hole in the left side of the wall. When the trap was triggered, an arrow would shoot out of the hole. You could render the trap ineffective by wedging the tile with a stopper, or by carefully cutting the wire. Fran chose to cut the wire.

She took a tension wrench and manipulated it into the gap. We were still on the first floor, and it was relatively easy. Fran wasn't even in the arrow's line of fire, and could always manually trigger it to expend the trap's single arrow. Really, the easiest way to deal with it was to not step on the tile. Still, it made for good practice.

"Woof."

Oh, you took care of some snakes for us?

"Arf!"

Jet killed some Shadow Snakes who tried to ambush Fran while she was working. As weak as they were, they could prove dangerous to an adventurer in the middle of disarming traps. A surprise attack could even make him trigger the trap by accident. Looked at like that, the Shadow Snakes might be more dangerous than they seemed.

"Done."

Yep. Looks good.

"Woof!"

Dungeons could regenerate, and this trap would reset in a few hours. That applied to the traps ahead of us, too. By the time we got to places where other adventurers had passed, we'd have fresh traps to practice with.

"Let's look for the next one."

Fran was having fun. She had an enthusiastic look as she searched for her next trap.

At least you're not complaining about it.

"Found one."

She happily approached her next challenge. I don't know what I would do if she asked to change to a Scout.

"Can I do this one too?" she asked.

Fran's eyes were gleaming as she held her kit. She took to disarming traps like a child with a puzzle game.

Having fun with it?

"Hm!"

Fran folded her arms triumphantly as she looked at the mechanism on the wall. She soon got the hang of it, and hummed as she went about her work.

"Hmhmm."

We'll keep lookout.

"Woof."

We carried on, disarming every trap we came by. The first level was quite easy. Weak monsters and straightforward, simple traps. By the time we found the staircase leading down, we still hadn't suffered any damage.

What now?

"Onward and downward."

"Arf!"

Fran and Jet couldn't wait. The first level didn't prove much of a challenge, so the sooner we went down, the better.

I guess the first floor is like a tutorial level.

"Hm."

Let's keep going until we find a proper challenge.

"I hope there's lots of traps there."

You really are hooked on this trap disarming thing.

If the second floor wasn't much different from the first, we would continue to the third and so on. We could only start clearing our guild quests from the tenth floor anyway.

Don't let your guard down, okay?

"I won't."

As easy as the floors were, we were still in a dungeon and stayed cautious of our surroundings.

We saw a familiar sight at the bottom of the stairs. The layout of the room looked a lot like the entrance. The road even split into three paths.

If it weren't for the number "2" written in the center of the room, I would've thought that we'd been teleported back to the entrance.

"Should we go left again?"

I don't see why not.

We didn't have much to go on anyway.

I wonder what kind of monsters are on the second floor.

"I hope it's hard."

Yeah.

We sallied on at our own pace, which eventually led us to the fourth floor. Neither the traps nor monsters had been much of a challenge so far. We hadn't seen any other adventurers either. They must've taken the fastest route through. Eventually, we felt the presence of an adventuring party ahead of us. Fran was in the middle of disarming a pitfall in front of a dead-end. I wondered what they'd make of that. We were wandering around without a map,

disarming every trap we ran into, even on paths that didn't lead anywhere.

Despite her initial excitement, Fran was beginning to look tired. She was getting bored with the easy traps and her tail lolled dully from side to side. At this rate, she could get sick of it altogether. I knew it was an inappropriate wish for an adventurer, but please spawn harder traps!

My prayer was soon answered.

Fran came to a stop at the entrance of the fifth floor. She examined the wall, then stared quietly at the floor.

"..."

The traps here were more difficult. Everything before this one was like a tutorial.

"Hmm..."

Which was good. Even though she grunted as she looked at the contraption, Fran looked excited again. She examined the trap from multiple angles to decide a plan of attack. As she started the dismantling procedure, we felt a presence approaching from the fourth floor. It must have been an adventuring party somewhere behind us.

The party consisted of about six people. They did their best to suppress their presence, although they weren't completely concealed. Even working on the trap, Fran noticed them. The room we were in had three branching paths, with the trap Fran was working on to the left.

Jet scouted ahead to see where it led and confirmed that it was a dead-end. We shouldn't be in the way. The other party might think Fran was a little weird for disarming a trap on a dead-end. We'd let them go if they made fun of her, but if they tried anything funny... Well, we'd cross that bridge when we got there.

"Fran? Is that you?"

“Inina?”

Fortunately, I had nothing to worry about.

We recognized the Hatchery right away. I understood why Fran wasn't on full alert. They weren't hostile toward her, and Inina was a member of her own race. Not that Fran was completely off her guard. Conduct in dungeons wasn't equated with life on the outside. Only a greenhorn would let her guard down around a new acquaintance. Fran was still cautious, but Inina on the other hand remained oblivious and approached with a smile.

“What are you doing here?”

Inina treated Fran like a close friend. She stood behind Fran without an ounce of caution. She had a long way to go as an adventurer.

The D-Ranks, Lest, Channum, and Galian, could only sigh at her relaxed attitude. They noticed that even Fran was smart enough to keep her guard up, if only at a bare minimum.

“Sorry about this.”

“Hm.”

Lest's simple apology contained multiple meanings. Sorry for disturbing you. Sorry for Inina getting close when you're clearly occupied. Sorry for not teaching Inina better.

Inina tilted her head, ignorant of the silent conversation taking place, although she didn't bother asking.

“So, whatcha up to?”

“Disarming a trap.”

“What, why? It's a dead-end. There's no need.”

“I need the practice.”

"I see. Disarming traps is something you have to do by yourself if you're running solo."

"Wow, that's great!"

Inina was about to pat Fran on the head, but pulled her hand back at the last second, knowing it might break Fran's concentration.

"Come on, Inina. Let's leave Fran to her trap training," Lest said, taking the right-hand path. That seemed to be the way forward.

"Okay!"

Inina herself noticed that she was being a bother and got up reluctantly.

"Take care of yourself, Fran."

"You too."

"We'll talk again next time!"

"Hm."

Inina waved goodbye, and Fran smiled. An unlearned observer might brush away her gesture as nothing more than a platitude, but Jet and I knew that Fran was in high spirits. She was glad to have met Inina and was looking forward to their next encounter.

That was nice.

"Hm!"

Energized by their conversation, Fran redoubled her efforts.

She progressed triumphantly through the dungeon, dismantling every trap she came across. Although her speed was hampered as the traps increased in difficulty. By the time we got to the sixth floor, the traps were more complicated than all the others put together. It took up an

appropriately long time to dismantle too. Fran's motivation didn't directly translate to an increase in speed.

"Teacher."

Yeah. Even the placement of these traps is getting trickier.

"Woof."

And they're getting harder, too.

"Hm."

I used Echolocation to see the insides of the trap. It had the complexity of a Rube Goldberg machine. I didn't know how much time it would take to dismantle. If I were alone, I would just trigger it from a safe distance. That was probably how Inina and crew handled it.

"I'll give it my best shot."

But Fran wanted to solve the puzzle and would probably sulk if I triggered it first. All I could do was be patient.

Fran tinkered with the trap with a serious look on her face. She was in a state of silent concentration, and didn't notice the beads of sweat dripping from her chin. The only sound was the soft click of metal and her own breath.

"Warf."

Jet yawned. Although he was keeping guard, he was beginning to slack off. I couldn't blame him, since the monsters didn't provide much of a challenge.

Five minutes later, Fran gasped.

"Ah."

Ah.

Three arrows shot down from the ceiling.

"Woof!"

You okay, Jet?

"Arf..."

He wasn't hurt, but his tail was grazed by the arrows.

"Arf..."

"Sorry. My fault."

Fran had cut a wire she wasn't supposed to.

You probably have to be a specialist to dismantle these traps. They're getting way harder.

"I'll get the next one."

No shame in trying, I guess.

"Hm!"

Fran hadn't lost her motivation. Since she was training her Disarm Trap skill, she might as well try. We regrouped and carried on.

You better focus, too, Jet.

"Woof!"

The arrows roused our direwolf. He looked determined not to be caught off guard again.

Looks like the entrance to the sixth floor is the same as all the rest.

"Three paths. Mind if we go left again?"

As always, the sixth floor started with three paths, but that was the only similarity. The traps here were very difficult. Fran failed to disarm some of them, and the mechanisms weren't the only thing that got harder. The arrows were now laced with poison, and the poison gas covered a much larger area than before. There were spikes at the bottom of the pitfalls, and spears jutted out faster from the walls. None of it was enough to kill you in one hit, but it was enough to maim the average adventurer. The

monsters got harder, too. We could still easily dispose of them, but they were one Threat Level above everything so far.

Fire Javelin!

“Grrr!”

“Ha!”

Jet and I held off an ogre with spells and gave Fran a chance to chop its head off.

“Hm!”

Nice!

Fran used the quickdraw technique she’d first used during the battle against Linford. Unlike the traditional quickdraw technique, she could pressurize the air in her sheath and easily control the direction of her swing. The pop allowed her to accelerate her slices faster too.

She was still practicing this technique, and there was a lag between her intention to use it and the assault, caused by focusing Wind Manipulation inside the sheath. Too early, and there won’t be enough pressure. Too late, and I would be stuck in the sheath. The sheath’s craftsmanship meant the casting time was about one or two seconds. That might seem like no time at all when faced with trash mobs, but against a formidable enemy it was the difference between life and death.

And the best way to train a skill was to use it over and over again.

Our offensive skills weren’t the only thing that required attention. The main purpose of our expedition today was to train our sense and detection.

Above us!

“Hm!”

Assassin Slime seeped through the cracks in the walls, while a Chameleon Lizard crept over the ceiling. Both were experts at hiding their presence. We could get better at our sense and detection skills just by fighting them, not that they were strong enough to be a challenge.

They were E-Threats, so as long as we were careful with our flank, we wouldn't take any damage. Honestly, the traps were a lot more dangerous now.

The monsters will get tougher the deeper down we go...

But it was still our first day, and we could spend a couple days training here. On the lower floors, we might get ambushed by creatures that were difficult to detect. Training here would prepare us for that.

Let's keep going until the monsters get harder.

"Sounds good."

We cleared the sixth floor and went down to the seventh. There, we met Lest and the others again.

"Teacher, over there!"

That's Lest!

Or at least, what was left of him.

Two dead adventurers lay face down in a pool of blood, and a young man was crumpled against a wall. We recognized the two immediately—Lest and Inina.

The young man wasn't too badly hurt, but he'd been knocked out cold. He had brown hair and was of average build and height. He was called Solus, if I remembered correctly.

Fran, heal him!

"..."

Fran!

“Ah...”

The sight of Inina’s dead body sent Fran into a state of shock.

Greater Heal!

And so I healed the lad in her stead.

“Huh... What... Where am I...?”

“What happened...?”

His voice brought Fran back to her senses.

“What happened?!”

She shook him impatiently, unable to contain her anger. Solus yelped at her sudden outburst.

“Eek...”

Fran, he’s still out of it. Calm down.

Inina’s death had shorted Fran’s calm composure. She didn’t have the patience to be nice.

“...”

“Uh, w-were you the one who saved me?”

“Hm...”

“Th-thank you. Wh-what happened to my friends? Are they okay?!”

“Lest and Inina didn’t make it...”

“No! Leader... Inina...! How could this happen...?” Solus cried, looking at the corpse of his former leader. “Uhh...”

“What happened?” Fran pressed.

I felt sorry for him, but we needed to know.

“We were attacked.”

“Monsters?”

“No. The monsters here aren’t powerful enough to wipe a six-man party like ours, even with the element of surprise.”

“What got you then?”

“People... Adventurers who rob other adventurers.”

I see. People like that existed even in this world. We’d heard rumors of dungeon robbers before. The guild would usually put a wanted sign up, along with a reward for bringing them to justice. That usually made for a speedy apprehension, but these bandits had the upper hand here.

“Adventurers...!”

Fran ground her teeth. She made no attempt to hide her hatred. A murderous air seeped out of her every pore.

“They got to Caillou and Channum with traps...”

The killers took care of the frontline by using readily-available traps.

“We were easy pickings once they were gone.”

“Even though you’re D-Rank?”

“We freaked after we saw what happened to the other two. They ambushed us from behind... When they killed Galian, they took out our only healer.”

They took down the tanks and healers, the core to every party. These bastards were tough.

“Me and Inina got hurt in the fight, but Lest used the last of his strength to use a Return Feather. It should’ve warped out anyone who was still alive, but...”

“The three of you are still here...”

“I see...”

Lest and Inina must’ve been alive when he used the Return Feather. However, he lost consciousness as it activated and died from his injuries.

“What did your attackers look like?”

“They wore hooded masks so I couldn’t make out their faces. Their equipment was nothing out of the ordinary...but I think there were five of them, all men.”

Well, what now? The attackers might be gone, but we couldn’t exactly tell Solus to take a hike out of the dungeon by himself. We had to go all the way, or risk losing sleep if he died. And so we decided to call it a day and escort him out of the dungeon. We had explored a fair amount for our first day and this was a good place to stop.

“Sorry about this.”

“It’s fine.”

“Thanks again. I’d like to take the leader and the rest but...”

That might seem like the appropriate thing to do, but that wasn’t the case among adventurers. It was standard practice to leave the corpses behind if anyone died in a dungeon. Bringing them back meant having to lug a corpse around, and I’m sorry to say that made for heavy baggage. It would only endanger the survivors.

There weren’t many parties who had the manpower to carry around the remains of their friends. Everyone expected the other party members to do the same if it happened to them.

“I can’t bear letting them be absorbed by the dungeon.”

The remains of people and monsters were assimilated by the dungeon after a certain amount of time. Monsters were reabsorbed immediately after you carved them up for materials, but people took about a day to fully dissolve. We still had time to take Inina and Lest’s bodies out.

“All right...”

Fran couldn't bring herself let Inina fade away either.

"It's just that I'm not very strong..."

Solus could barely lift Lest's body. He might be stronger than he looked, but carrying both of them was impossible. He looked at Fran apologetically.

"I'm sorry for dragging you into this...but could you carry Inina?"

Solus bowed his head deeply. He knew how ridiculous this request was, but he was willing to suffer the shame for the sake of his fallen friends.

Teacher, can I?

We don't have time to look for the rest of his party, but we can take these two.

"Hm. I'll help."

"R-really? Thank you! I'll leave Inina to you."

"No problem. I don't have to carry them," Fran said, storing their bodies in her Pocket Dimension.

"What? Where'd you put them?"

"Pocket Dimension."

"O-oh! Wow, I've never seen that before."

"Hm. Let's go."

"Wait for me!"

Fran went up the stairs and Solus tottered after her, still shocked. We made our way back to the entrance with Solus in tow. He strode along sure-footedly. Despite being healed, he should've lost a fair amount of blood. Maybe it was because he was a Scout.

"Fran, do you have any detection skills? I only have Presence Sense."

"Hm."

Solus was surprisingly talkative for someone who had just lost his entire party. Maybe that was his way of coping.

Fran only nodded.

Our trip back went smoothly, since the traps we disarmed earlier hadn't reset yet. Hopefully that would be true for the traps on the fifth and sixth floors. I wouldn't want to trip them again...

Suddenly, Fran came to a halt.

"Wh-what's wrong?"

"Someone's here."

"What...?"

Solus was startled, but we clearly felt the presence of people ahead of us. The three men slowed down as they cautiously approached.

"Hey there."

"Hm. Hey."

"Are the two of you alone?"

"No way! What kind of monster would leave two kids unsupervised in a dungeon!"

"R-right. Where are your friends?"

Solus wasn't old enough to be mistaken for a high-ranking adventurer, and Fran was still a child. The three men had every right to call them kids. They looked at Fran in utter shock, but soon calmed down and started asking questions.

"Are the two of you really alone?"

"Are you adventurers?"

"Is that wolf your familiar?"

"If you're lost, why not join us until we find your friends?"

“That’s a great idea!”

“I concur!”

What nice men. They were genuinely concerned for Fran and Solus—but I wasn’t transmigrated to this world yesterday! I Identified them, thinking that their timing was a little too convenient. Their skill sheets were quite grim.

Steal, Torture, Blackmail, Fraud. And they all had the Murderer title to boot.

They would get chummy with an unsuspecting adventurer, and cut them down when they least expected it. Guild cards only tracked the number of monsters you killed; dungeons were the perfect crime scenes.

Were these the guys who attacked Solus’s party? Were they unrelated? I concentrated and felt another presence lurking behind us. Whoever it was had murder on their mind. That made four clearly hostile individuals.

Fran, these men are bandits.

Hm.

Arf?

What is it, Jet?

Arf arf?

Jet tilted his head, wondering why I was back on Identifying people. Hadn’t Dias advised me to be more careful?

Yes. But Dias said that was mainly around nobility and royalty. Not only is it bad manners, but we might get dragged into a conspiracy. Dungeons are a different story. You run into suspicious thugs down here, like the ones standing in front of us right now. Identify is a necessary precaution. What kind of stupid idealist do you have to be to trust heavily armed men you just met?

If they got upset at being Identified, that meant they had something to hide. Maybe they had a powerful skill up their sleeve... I mean if the people we meet in dungeons Identified us, we'd be fine with that too.

And that's why it's okay.

As I wrapped up my justification, the men were getting impatient.

"For the last time, we'll help you get back to the entrance."

Fran's silence was getting on his nerves.

Fran, leave one alive for questioning. I think the warrior-looking guy's the leader.

And the others?

Well, we're not dragging their sorry asses out of this dungeon. Kill the rest.

Hm. Got it.

Their stats are about average, so stay sharp. Jet, you take care of Solus.

Grr!

Still, I was worried that these men weren't the ones who'd killed Solus's party. What if they had reformed their ways and their skills were just a sad reminder of their past?

Hopefully, they would initiate the attack.

As if on queue, the angry man made his move.

"Ah, screw this," said the leader signaling his hidden ally in the darkness.

A man armed with a dagger approached Fran at staggering speed. He didn't intend to kill, only injure. It was a dirty tactic, but I was impressed by his wisdom in combat.

Fran might seem like a harmless little girl, but he wasn't about to let his guard down.

Still, too easy.

"Wha—"

He hid his presence well, but not enough to escape our notice. I stopped his dagger with Telekinesis. While he was puzzled at his arm being suspended in mid-slice, I cut off his head with a wind spell.

Fran didn't even turn.

"Huh? What?"

We left Solus to his bewilderment and made our move.

"Duzz! What did you—"

"You little bit—"

"Guah!"

Fran decapitated one of the men, sliced the head of another to pieces, and smacked the remaining one with the flat of her blade. Their ambush was well-coordinated, but they were poor combatants.

"Gaah!"

The impact sent the man flying into the wall so hard that it almost left new cracks in it. His arm and ribs were probably shattered. His back couldn't be in good shape either. As he groaned in agonizing pain, the man managed to eke out a whisper.

"Urk... How...?"

"Saw right through you."

"Damn it..."

He moaned in frustration and coughed up blood.

Teacher, what should we do with him?

We'll take him to the guild. If he has any more friends there, he can point them out to us.

As we talked, Solus shuffled forward. He brought down his sword without warning.

Clank.

He would've killed the last bandit if Fran hadn't used me to stop him.

"What are you doing?"

"S-sorry. When I look at him, I just..."

This was the man who killed his party. Solus put away his sword, his face pale. He glared at the man with dull eyes and grim expression.

"I know how you feel. But..."

Fran turned to the bandit with murderous rage. If I hadn't told her to spare him, she would've taken his life. For Inina's sake.

"We're taking him to the guild."

"Y-yeah. You're right."

Afterward, Solus suggested that he take point. His rage was still there, so having Solus right next to the bandit who killed his friends was probably a bad idea. We tied up the unconscious bandit and put him on Jet's back. We healed him just enough so he wouldn't bleed to death. Even if he woke up, I didn't think he could do any harm.

The traps reset themselves halfway through the fifth floor, but Solus spotted them with ease and even dismantled a few. He was a pretty good Scout.

About twenty minutes later, Jet yelped suddenly.

"Woof!"

Huh?

“Jet?”

“Arf.”

Jet was holding a thick spear in his mouth. A trap had activated and dropped it from the ceiling. He reflexively caught it in his mouth. Impressive.

“You okay?”

“Urrrf!”

“S-sorry.”

Solus didn’t spot the trap in time. We were speeding out of the dungeon, so maybe his concentration had slipped. Spotting traps was difficult even for us.

Kzzt...

Huh? What was that? My brain felt like it was hit with a static jolt. Not that I had a brain.

Hmmm?

What’s wrong, Teacher?

Did you feel something weird just now? It’s a little hard to describe, but...

Hm?

Fran tilted her head.

You didn’t catch that, Fran?

Uhhhh.

Jet, what about you?

Arf?

Jet didn’t know what I was talking about either, and those two were much more sensitive than I was. Was I imagining things?

“Sorry. I stepped on a trap...”

Kzzt...

There it was again!

What about now?

Hm?

Woof?

They were still oblivious.

What is going on? Did one of my skills sense the traps?
It was so hard to understand.

Well, we just have to keep going.

"Hm."

"Uh, are you okay?"

Solus looked worried. Fran and Jet were tilting their heads for no apparent reason. He must've thought they were in pain.

"I'm fine."

"Woof."

"If you say so..."

"We should hurry," Fran said, ordering Solus to keep going.

"R-right."

We pressed on until suddenly, he stopped.

"There's something over there."

"Where?"

"There."

Solus pointed at something, not that I could tell what. I knew there was a trap on that wall, but I didn't think that's what he was looking at. More importantly, was that buzz going to happen again?

"It's right there. We should check it out!"

Kzzt!

There it was again, still as unpleasant as the first time I felt it. At least now I knew for sure. But before I could figure out what was causing that strange sensation, Fran and Jet rushed to where Solus had pointed.

Did they forget about the trap?

Fran, wait! Solus—

Before I could warn her, Solus tripped the trap. Tiny holes opened all around us, filling the area with gas.

Poison gas!

We had Abnormal Status Resistance and Poison Drain so we were perfectly safe...but the bandit was getting poisoned! I noticed his health draining away and quickly cast an antidote spell. That could've ended poorly.

"Oh no! Sorry about that!"

How many times was this guy going to mess up?

"A-are you okay?"

We couldn't see Solus through the poison gas.

Again, that buzz.

It only happened when Solus said something. Was he using some kind of skill? On us?

Waves of suspicion rushed through me like a broken dam. I looked back on what happened so far. Solus had identified the last of the bandits as the leader and tried to kill him, but how did he know? When we found him, he said they all wore hooded masks. How did he know that they were even men, if they all wore such garments?

Then he'd ignored the adventurer's rule by asking us to carry Lest and Inina's corpses out of here. Was he trying to slow us down?

After that, Solus had asked Fran about her skills. I thought it was just nerves, but he was clearly trying to probe her.

He'd tried to kill the bandit leader as soon as we caught him, then started activating one trap after another.

All of this was very suspicious.

But he came out clean from my lie detector. That's why I'd trusted him so far. He felt like an old friend, despite only meeting us today.

The facts filled me with unspeakable anxiety and dread.

Was Solus using something on us? If so, what? Had I misunderstood somehow? He was acting very suspicious, but I didn't have any proof...

Fran, Jet, don't say a word.

?

Arf?

Hear me out—

And so, Jet collapsed to the floor and Fran dropped to one knee, her breathing ragged. It was all an act of course. If my suspicions were correct, Solus would take this chance to do something.

I could activate Telekinesis instantly, and quietly cast the Dimension spell Chronos Clock on Fran and Jet, allowing them to perceive everything in slow motion. They could easily dodge any incoming attack.

The only downside was that they would hear Solus's speech slowed down, too. Fran wouldn't be able to understand what he was saying, so I didn't cast the spell on myself.

"Did...you cast a spell on yourself?"

“...”

“Fran? Are you all right?”

Solus had felt the casting of a spell. Maybe I shouldn't have used Chronos Clock. Still, I didn't know what he might do, and I wanted to take precautions. But this was strange. His only detection skills were Presence Sense and Trap Sense. He didn't have Mana Sense or Spell Sense, so how did he detect my cast? If his Presence Sense was at a higher level it might have been possible, but his was only Level 5. How did he do it?

And then it dawned on me.

Fake Identity?

And just after Dias had completely fooled us with it too!

The Unique Skill was so rare that I didn't think multiple people in the same town would have it. I guess that couldn't be said of the Dungeon City.

As my suspicions toward Solus rose, he walked over to us.

“Urgh.”

Keep groaning in agony, Fran! You're doing good!

“The poison really got to you... Don't worry. Soon, you won't feel any pain.”

I used Essence of Falsehood and found that he wasn't lying, but his actions contradicted his words. He took out his sword and brought it down on Fran. I guess he wasn't lying in the end. You can't feel pain when you're dead. It was a cliché really. Nevertheless, Fran managed to dodge his attack easily.

“Hm.”

“What?! How!”

Fran stood and drew me.

“Hmph!”

“Aaaargh!”

She cut through Solus’s right wrist, lopping off his sword hand. On the return stroke, she chopped off his right leg.

“Wh-what...”

Solus dropped to the ground in shock.

I dispelled Chrono Clock so she could interrogate him properly.

“Heal.”

He’d just lost an arm and a leg. We weren’t going to restore him to full health, but we couldn’t just let him bleed out.

Let’s start with some easy questions.

“How did you know I cast something?”

“A skill of course.”

He wasn’t lying. He had a skill that could detect it.

“Presence Sense?”

“Heh... Maybe. Or maybe it’s something else.”

He still wasn’t lying, but was clearly phrasing his answers so that it wouldn’t register. Was he used to this kind of interrogation?

Solus either wanted to negotiate or mock Fran. He held his ground and looked her in the eye, but Fran had no intention of negotiating.

“Hmph.”

“Raaagh!”

She wasted no time in plunging me through Solus’s back. I understood the sentiment. There was a good chance

that this was Inina's murderer. She looked at him with ice cold eyes.

"Gaaah!" Solus squirmed and spasmed.

"Heal. I'll ask you again. How did you know I cast something?"

"And...if I said I didn't know?"

"Then I'll keep hurting you until you tell me. Slowly. You can forget about killing yourself too. I'll heal you out of it."

"..."

Fran's lack of expression came in handy at times like these. She sounded dead serious. Although in this case, she really was. Solus could feel it too. I could see the fear in his eyes.

"You'll spare me at least...won't you?"

It was Solus's desperate plea that made me realize he was the source of the strange static I was feeling. He definitely was up to something. It felt like the threatening caress of a blade. I couldn't ignore it anymore.

Fran, did you feel that?

"?"

What about you, Jet?

Bark?

They were still oblivious. Why was I the only one who could feel it? I had the Mage skill to thank for it, I guess—it allowed me to feel the flow of mana around me. I might not be able to detect physical sensations as well as Fran, but I was much more sensitive to mana.

Did he do something?

Most likely.

"Hm."

Fran nodded before burying me deep in Solus's spine. She made it hurt worse for him, too.

"Eeeaaagh..."

I felt his lungs collapse around my blade. A normal person would be dead by now, but when an adventurer got strong enough, they became cursed with durability.

"Urg. Gurg. Eeerk."

"Mid Heal."

"Aaah..."

By the time she healed his wounds, despair had come over Solus's face. He understood that Fran meant every word.

"Don't try anything stupid."

"Grrr."

"Urgh... *Huff*..."

Solus panted and gasped for air in panic, or maybe because his punctured lung was suddenly healed. He no longer tried to hide his fear. Tears welled up in his eyes.

"Okay, okay, I'll talk!"

"Answer my last question."

"M-Mana Sense!"

I knew it.

"How are you hiding it?"

"Y-you have Identify...?"

Fran answered with a gesture.

"Hm."

"Gyaaah!"

Solus screamed, having been stabbed for the third time. When would he learn? Perhaps his *modus operandi*

was to drag people in through innocent conversation. It wouldn't work on Fran though.

"Heal. What did I just say? Now answer the question."

"Okay... Okay! It's a skill called Fake Identity!"

So far so good.

"Deactivate it."

"All right! There! I turned it off!"

Kzzzt!

That feeling again.

I could see his Mana Sense now, as well as his real stats...but I hadn't figured out what was causing the odd sensation.

Well?

He might still be hiding something. Get him to turn it off on everything.

"Hm. You're not using it to hide any other skills?"

"How would y—o-okay! No! I'm not hiding anything else!"

Solus's backtalk only made Fran raise her sword menacingly. He screamed and begged for mercy, but his words triggered Essence of Falsehood.

He's lying. He's still hiding something.

He was already freaking out from Fran seeing his stats.

"Hm."

"Aaagh! Wh-why..."

"Turn off Fake Identity."

"How did you... A-all right! I'll turn it off! The skill's attached to my ring, just let me take it off!" Solus screamed, waving his left hand.

He bit the ring off his middle finger. It was the only way he could take it off, now that he was missing his right hand. But the ring was fixed there. That was the annoying thing about rings. The slightest weight gain or bruise made them get stuck. Solus gnawed and tugged at the ring, but his efforts were for naught.

“Urgh...mggh...”

Fran lost her patience.

“Enough.”

“Wai—aaargh!”

The moment Solus pulled his mouth away, Fran sliced his finger in one quick motion. Although he was screaming in pain, I was impressed that Fran managed to keep the ring intact.

“Heal.”

“Eeerk.”

Unfortunately, the ring shattered all the same. It was one of those pieces of equipment which destroyed itself when separated from its user. However, now that it was destroyed, I could use Identify on the remnants. The Ring of Poison Resistance turned out to be a Ring of Fake Identity.

Now I could see Solus’s stats in their entirety.

Name: Solus

Age: 30

Race: Half Magus

Class: Maze Scout

Level: 34

HP: 208; Magic: 187; Strength: 141; Agility: 237

Skills: Assassinate 3; Lie Detector 4; Acting 6; Stealth 6; Disassemble 6; Deceive 5; Presence Sense 5; Conceal Presence 3; Hush 4; Sword Arts 5; Sword Mastery 7; Throw 4; Poison Resistance 6; Venomology 5; Mana Sense 6; Trap Sense 6; Disarm Trap 6; Spirit Manipulation.

Unique Skill: Fake Identity 2; Coercive Influence

Titles: Traitor; Murderer

His skills and stats were much higher than I'd thought. Solus was about as strong as a C-Rank. In fact, he might be stronger than the C-Ranks we met in Alessa. He had some notable skills too.

So he has two Unique Skills, one of which is Fake Identity.

His own Fake Identity was amplified by the ring. What an interesting strategy. Faced with people who had Identify like us, Solus was able to turn off his Fake Identity at will. However, he concealed his vital information with his ring.

He must have one hell of a Unique Skill to hide.

Coercive Influence, huh?

"Coercive Influence? What kind of skill is that?"

"You see... Wait, all right, I'll talk! Put the sword down and the send the wolf away! I'll talk!"

"Grr."

That was it. Less yapping, more talking.

"This skill allows me to gain affinity with those around me. It makes them treat me like a friend. The only downside is that it's not strong enough to make people fall in love with me or treat me as their best friend."

So that's why we didn't suspect Solus of any wrongdoing. I noticed the odd sensation, but even then I chalked it up to my imagination.

"The skill lets me evade hard questions and suspicion. Even if someone asks, I can lead the conversation elsewhere."

"So you used this skill to join adventuring parties and then betray them?"

"That's right."

There it was. No wonder he tripped every trap we came across. I felt like it was taking longer to get out of the dungeon too. No wonder Solus hid the existence of Coercive Influence. Under the skill's sway, he could lull Fran into letting her guard down. Even now, he probably thought he could still get out of this.

"Were the people we ran into the ones who attacked Inina?"

"Yes."

"Friends of yours?"

"Yeah." Solus nodded, and Fran's murderous intent immediately multiplied. She might have activated Menace by accident. Blood drained from Solus's face as he realized she was no ordinary adventurer.

"Where's your other friend? You said there's one left."

Five bandits attacked the Hatchery, but we only took down four. I thought there might be another one lurking in the shadows but...

"I'm the fifth."

Essence of Falsehood didn't trigger. He was telling the truth.

Solus was a meticulous planner. He could've picked any number of lies, but he stuck with the truth. Most likely a precaution against lie-detecting skills. With Fake Identity and Coercive Influence, it would take an expert to detect the slightest foul play.

Looking back, most of Solus's statements had been vague. He misled us, but he never lied. With the help of Coercive Influence, he didn't have to. That was how he got us.

Essence of Falsehood was useful, but it couldn't detect someone's intentions. Solus just taught me that I needed to be careful, even when checking for lies.

"How many friends do you have outside the dungeon?"

"Zero. You killed them all just now."

Lie.

"You're lying. How many?"

Fran pointed me in front of his eyes.

"Lie Detector too..."

He noticed that then. He really was careful.

"Do you want to tell me now or should I torture you again?"

"I have four people under me!"

"Hm."

Honesty is the best policy. This guy was the leader of this crew.

"Where are they?"

"They're...at the guild today."

Solus would begin by planning which party to infiltrate. He usually targeted weaker parties, since no one would be surprised if they died in a dungeon. Still, he would let one

party survive every month to keep down rumors of him being the source of their deaths. How prudent of him.

He'd targeted the Hatchery because they had obtained a certain potion. A potion made from the materials of a Pandemic Leech, a rare monster in this dungeon. The potion was rare, and indispensable for those who sought it.

Solus heard how Lest got a hold of it, and promptly infiltrated the party. In the end, he killed them all to steal it.

We told him to bring us to his friends. We needed to take out the trash.

Let's tie him up.

"Hm."

Don't let your guard down, Fran. Tie him up real tight.

"Hmph."

"O-ow! The rope's digging into my—urrfgh!"

"Mid Heal. Shut up. Don't talk unless I tell you to."

Fran punched him in the solar plexus. The blow might have ruptured his internals somewhat because he coughed up blood. She had no mercy for Inina's killer. Sensing her wrath, Solus only nodded, tears running down his face.

"Jet."

"Woof!"

Jet was already carrying one criminal on his back, but he was strong enough to carry another. Fran loaded Solus onto him.

Let's head back.

"Hm."

Monsters attacked as we made our way out, but they all suffered cruel ends from Fran's rage. She didn't kill them in

a sadistic way...but it was certainly overkill. I couldn't help but feel sorry for them.

But monsters and traps weren't the only things waiting for us.

Adventurers up ahead.

"Hm."

The adventurers called out when they saw Solus lying on Jet's back. If they were only curious then all would be well, but one of them knew Solus personally. As an upright and honest adventurer at that.

"What did you do to him?!"

"Solus! Are you okay?!"

It was the party we ran into on the fourth floor.

To people who only knew his façade, Solus must've seemed like an awful sight. The three warriors readied their weapons.

"Let go of him right now!"

I didn't know the kind of work Solus did on the outside, but they clearly thought Fran was the bad guy. One of them pointed his sword at Fran, with Intimidate in tow. Our other captive was an adventurer, too, although the misguided party didn't plead for *his* release.

"No."

"What?"

"Why would you do such a thing? Let him go!"

"He attacked me first. I caught him."

"Impossible! Solus would never do anything like that! You're crazy!"

"Am I? Are you his bandit friends too? Are you trying to save your boss?"

“Us? Bandits? How dare you!”

“Just let him go and no one gets hurt.”

“...”

This was bad.

Fran was getting angrier. The three adventurers had antagonized her with Intimidate, and she was coming to the conclusion that they were fair game.

We should spare them—they might be victims of Solus’s lies too. That said, an argument to convince them otherwise might lead to further bloodshed...

Now, what was Solus going to do?

We would be in trouble if he started talking again. He might convince them that Fran was a wanted criminal.

“...”

But he chose to hold his peace. He was clearly awake, but he pretended to be unconscious. He knew that his would-be saviors were no match for Fran. If he spoke up, he would only bring even worse tortures for himself. Very smart.

I thought we could knock them all out cold and be done with it, but a dungeon was too dangerous for that, and leaving them here would be the same as killing them. Fran wouldn’t usually be so murderous, but her heart was consumed by grief and rage. She wanted to lash out.

Jet, Fran, we’re getting out of here. We can’t afford to waste time negotiating.

Fine...

Arf!

I focused on the two warriors in the back and pushed them apart with Telekinesis. Then Jet and I rushed past.

Fran kicked the jaw of the man in front, giving him a nice concussion. He immediately fell to the floor. I apologized, though I knew his two friends wouldn't leave him to give chase. They would take care of their fallen comrade.

Let's go!

"Hm."

"Woof, woof!"

The adventurers yelled at us, but their friend was still knocked out. They had no chance of catching us now.

We'll sprint all the way to the entrance.

"All right."

There were no dangerous traps up ahead, and we could ignore all the monsters that we came across. Sprinting was our safest bet against nosy adventurers. The plan worked. We ran into no trouble the rest of the way. After exiting the dungeon gates however, we became the center of attention.

Jet looked as menacing as he possibly could. Plus, there were two half-naked men tied up on his back, their faces covered with cloth. I'd give us weird looks, too, if I didn't know better.

We decided to cover their faces after our run-in with the last party. That way, any of Solus's acquaintances wouldn't recognize him. In hindsight, we should've done that sooner. In any case, Fran and Jet had no trouble standing out in the crowd. They looked too suspicious for the local guard to leave us alone.

"Wh-what's going on here?"

"Did something happen?"

"Wh-what?"

"That guy's injured pretty bad."

The gatekeepers called for backup. This was no time for excuses. We had to tell the truth. Solus's gang was still out there, and they might escape if we made a scene now. We had to get going.

When the guards questioned her, Fran told them the facts.

"They attacked me in the dungeon and I caught them."

A crowd gathered and broke into murmurs.

"She did that in self-defense—"

"That's ruthless—"

They seemed terrified of her. I guess I could understand why. Here were two men, one of whom was literally missing an arm and a leg. They were loaded on top of this little girl's giant wolf like baggage. It was quite a terrifying sight really.

"What? So these are the bandits?"

"Hm."

"Good job, little lady! Very good!"

Instead of suspicion, Fran received commendations and applause. Guards and adventurers alike were horrified at criminal activity in the dungeon—it was the worst form of betrayal.

I thought they would question her further, but Fran's looks actually helped her in this case. There was no way this innocent little girl would lie about tying up two grown men and loading them on her fluffy pet direwolf. The only thing left to do was get back to the guild and give these two a proper hearing.

The guards thought the same thing.

"You're going to the guild?"

"Hm."

“Then allow us to escort you there.”

We were grateful for the offer. Getting back to the guild would take too much time if we had to explain ourselves to every guard we passed.

“Sure.”

Fran nodded, putting their trust in them. And so we went with three guards leading us, but a strange thing happened on our way. A powerful presence approached rapidly, filling me with terror. I thought it was one of Solus’s accomplices at first and charged up Telekinesis out of pure reflex.

“Frannie, are you all right?!”

But it just turned out to be Elza. Fran readied herself for a battle, but relaxed when she realized who it was.

Elza glared menacingly at the guards, thinking they had arrested Fran. But after Fran explained the situation, she looked genuinely worried.

“Oh no, Frannie. Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“Thank goodness. Were you scared?”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re so brave. So these are the bandits?”

“Yeah.”

Elza directed her rage at Solus, her face like the mask of a Buddhist Nio statue. The captured bandits trembled in fear, even through their blindfolds.

Elza closed in and whispered into Solus’s ear, “Good for you.”

“Eeek...”

Solus shrieked, though not because of the voice brushing against his ear.

"If Fran had suffered a single scratch, I would've crushed you with my bare hands."

Fran wasn't hurt, although she did take a face full of poison gas. Not that Elza would ever know. We needed Solus alive and able to give coherent testimony, which he probably wouldn't be after Elza was through with him.

Hey, Fran. Maybe we should get Elza to catch Solus's gang for us.

Why?

There's a good chance that she knows their faces, and she's definitely stronger than all of them put together. She'd be a lot faster since she wouldn't have to bring Solus along for confirmation too.

We were attracting quite a crowd. I was beginning to worry if we would reach the guild in time.

Good thing we ran into Elza.

"Elza."

"Yes, dear?"

"I need a favor."

"Done!"

"I haven't told you what it is yet."

"Consider it done anyway! I'll do anything for you, just say the word! You want the Guildmaster's family jewels? You want me to find those mean guards and punish them for you? I can do it!"

Family jewels? Punish? You're joking. Please tell me you're joking? Elza's eyes were dead serious. I felt a chill run down my inanimate blade.

Fran didn't seem to understand Elza's suggestions.
"I need you to find this man's friends."

"Oh? So he has friends, does he?"

"Hm. They're at the Adventurer's Guild."

"Are they now?"

Fran gave Elza their names and appearances, and her eyes glinted like a dragon.

"I never knew we had such idiots at the guild."

"Capture them any way you want."

"You got it. You just need them alive, right?"

"Hm. As long as we can get information out of them."

"All right then. If I kill them by accident, I'll make up the bounty myself!"

No, we don't care about the bounty! We need them alive so we can interrogate them about their accomplices and past crimes!

"I'll be off then!"

"Hm. Good luck."

Fran, no. You shouldn't have done that!

"Heeheehee! Oh I feel so much stronger now that I know you're rooting for me! Braver and stronger and filled with love! Just you wait, Frannie! I'll serve them up on a golden platter for you!"

Elza sprinted away, evidently delighted that Fran was worried for her safety.

And she's off...

Teacher?

It's nothing. Right, Jet?

"Arf."

I just hoped those accomplices would come back in one piece.

Thirty minutes after Elza disappeared with the wind, we were hurrying back to the guild. If we'd been by ourselves, it only would've taken five minutes (we'd already memorized the roadmap), but we needed to wait for the guards to catch up.

"W-we're here."

"Woof."

"Hm."

The guards were panting and doubled over as we came to a halt. We might have been running a little too fast for them.

"Gyaaaaa!"

"H-help!"

We didn't even need to enter the guild to know that Elza was having one hell of a time. Fran peeked through the door to see four men kneeling in front of Elza.

"Welcome back, Frannie."

"These are the ones?"

"That's right. I made sure to confirm it before laying down the law."

"I'll tell you anything!"

"We admit it! We did it! Please just get her away from us!"

"W-we can't take anymore!"

The three men cowered.

"So you're the ones who've been attacking adventurers in the dungeons?"

“Yes! Yes!”

“Who’s the leader? Who told you to do it?”

“W-we do.”

“Who is it?”

“W-well...”

“If we say anything...”

The men muttered in fear. Elza leaned in.

“Oh? Are you more scared of this person than you are of me? I guess you need more punishment.”

Blood immediately drained from the men’s faces.

“Oh gods, please! Solus! E-Rank Adventurer Solus is our ringleader!”

“He’s hiding his real strength! He’s strong enough to beat a D-Rank!”

“He would kill us in an instant!”

Solus genuinely terrified his men. He was stronger than them, and he wasn’t above using dirty tricks to dispose of his targets. They’d worked with him for a long time and the mystery of his real power made them believe that he was a monster. Granted, he *was* pretty strong.

“Very good. And you’ll be all right. Fran already took care of nasty Solus, didn’t you, Fran?”

Elza’s question made Fran the center of the guild’s attention.

“Is that the Swordceress—”

“The D-Rank—”

“She’s a Black Cat—”

“Sh-she’s adorable—”

She didn't immediately win the adoration of her peers. Not that they hated her, but the adventurers were mostly just curious.

"Here." Fran pulled Solus down from Jet's back and tossed him to Elza.

"Hurk."

"Thank you, dear."

Elza took off the cloth covering Solus's face, and his friends screamed in terror. Even bound and maimed, Solus still terrified them. It took them a while to get over the shock.

"I-Is that really Solus?"

"No way..."

Fran unloaded the other bandit.

"Where do you want this one?"

"Hang on, sweetie. One at a time. The GM should be here soon."

"Hm. Got it."

"What do you want to do in the meantime? Shall we have tea?"

"Hm."

"As for these idiots—the rest of you, don't let them out of your sight."

"Understood!"

Elza left Solus and his cronies to the watchful eyes of the guild and led Fran to the guild watering hole. I had my doubts about leaving them unsupervised, but the adventurers were determined to follow Elza's commands. They stood guard with eagle eyes, terrified of the punishment Elza might rain down on them if they failed.

And this was the Adventurer's Guild. As good as Solus was at sweet-talking, he was still surrounded.

Elza and Fran had tea for about thirty minutes. By the end, a large number of empty plates were stacked high in front of them as they had both eaten a large number of cakes. Elza did most of the talking while Fran nodded and ate, but both seemed to be enjoying themselves. She was a good conversationalist, with lots to talk about. I could see how she would be popular among both men *and* women.

"Now what's all this about?" Dias said as he finally returned to the guild.

"You're late," said Eliza. "What were you doing?"

"Making the rounds. Looks like you had fun."

"Oh, you don't know the half of it."

"Good, good. So, you're the traitors I've been hearing about?"

"Eek!"

"Aah...!"

Boy, Dias was feeling murderous today. He had the aura of an A-Rank Guildmaster, and no mercy for traitors. Some of the surrounding adventurers even turned pale.

"Hmm. You've been up to some awful things, I see."

Had he used Mind Read? If he had, I hadn't felt it. The skill was hard enough to detect on its own, and I wasn't even the target. I had to work on my detection skills more.

"And this is the ringleader?"

"Yes, he is. His name is Solus and he's very good at hiding his powers." Solus did his best to lie low. He avoided putting on airs or bragging about his strength, hiding behind the guise of an unassuming youth.

“Indeed. The fact that I have trouble remembering his face is testament to that.”

Dias.

Teacher, is that you? I didn't know you could send private messages over Telepathy.

Well, I can. Anyway, Solus has the Unique Skills Fake Identity and Coercive Influence. You need to be careful with the latter. He can immediately gain your trust if you let him talk.

“Hmm...you have some interesting skills, I see.”

“Wh-who's to say?”

“No matter. You'll feel like talking soon enough. I'll make sure of it.”

The frost in Dias's voice sent chills down Solus's spine.

“What's going to happen to him?”

“We'll process him, of course, and he'll either get the death penalty or be sold into hard labor, though I doubt he would make a good slave. He might use his skills to give his owners the slip. Death penalty it is. Either instantly or by torture.”

Death by torture? This world really was violent. But I agreed with his decision. Solus could have easily escaped otherwise. The other bandits were pleading through their gags, but they failed to win any sympathy.

There was one problem though, which was quite unfortunate.

Solus's Unique Skill.

Coercive Influence was amazing. Though relying on it constantly could cause problems, the skill would probably remain hidden if we only used it once in a while. It was Solus's abuse of it that led to his downfall. Nevertheless,

Skill Taker was still on cooldown. I had to wait another two months to use it again. I doubted Dias would let him live that long. I had to give up on it.

"Hm," said Fran. "That works."

"Good. Thanks for your help."

"Sure. I need another favor."

"What is that?"

"I want you to give these two a proper burial."

Fran took Lest and Inina from her Pocket Dimension. Dias and Elza winced.

"So he attacked the Hatchery?"

"No... They were such good boys and girls..."

They knew of the party's good intentions. Dias agreed to give them a proper burial. Fran wiped the blood from Inina's face and draped a piece of cloth over her body. Her eyes were filled with sadness, grief over the passing of the first Black Cat she'd met in a long time.

"We'll bury them in the adventurers' cemetery."

"Thank you."

"One more thing. Elza and Fran, you have the right to claim these men's belongings. Will you take them?"

"I don't need to. I just wanted to help Frannie out. You take it, sweetie."

Teacher?

We're good for equipment. But maybe they have some interesting magic items on hand. Potions would be nice.

"Any potions?"

"We have some life potions here. Most of them are low level, but one's pretty good. But here's an interesting concoction. A Drawback Reduction potion."

“What’s it do?”

“This is my first time seeing one. It’s rare. But it reduces the drawbacks and costs of a given skill.”

Wow! Will that work on me? It had to be extraordinarily rare if Dias had never seen one.

“Does it work on inanimate objects? Can I use it on a magic item that’s on cooldown, for example?”

“That’s an interesting line of thought...but it should work, since it’s an enchanted potion.”

I could use it to reduce the cooldown on Skill Taker!

“I’ll take the high-level life potion along with the Drawback Reduction potion. You can keep the rest.”

“Of course. Then allow me to split the bounty between the two of you.”

“Oh, I don’t need it. Helping Fran is reward enough for me.” Elza refused her reward, despite being the one who apprehended Solus’s accomplices.

What should we do?

Well, if she wants to give it to us, then we have to accept. Tell her you’ll take her out to lunch or something. Just taking her reward without doing anything in return scares me.

There’s nothing quite as terrifying as a free lunch.

“All right. I’ll take it. But you have to let me treat you in exchange.”

“So we can have lunch again?”

“Hm.”

“Goodness me! Really? I would love to!”

Right answer. Elza squirmed her muscular body in utmost ecstasy. She couldn’t care less about the lunch, but

she certainly loved being with Fran.

We'll let the guild take care of the rest.

"Hm."

That Coercive Influence skill, though...

"Hrmph." Fran grumbled.

What?

You don't have to get Coercive Influence, she said.

Why not? It could come in really handy.

I don't want it. You said you wouldn't use Essence of Falsehood at the beginning because of how scary it is. But you've been using it more and more.

Uh...

It's only a skill that lets you see through lies, and you're only using it to protect me, I understand that. But that just means I'm too weak to defend myself.

Fran...

Even if you say you'll only use Coercive Influence when you absolutely have to, you'll probably end up using it even when you don't.

Well...

I couldn't argue with her. I *had* been using Essence of Falsehood a lot.

But skills that let you read others' minds scare me, Fran thought. *That fat noble...the one who had Essence of Falsehood?*

August Allsand.

She had completely forgotten his name.

August and Solus both had rotten hearts. I'm sure their skills corrupted them and they lost their faith in other

people. That's why I don't want you using it.

How many times had Fran taught me instead of the other way round? And I was supposed to be her guardian. Yet again, I realized how pathetic I was.

Yeah...you're right, Fran.

I was weak. Convenience was my greatest temptation. I would make every excuse to use those horrible skills.

Right! I'll put Coercive Influence behind me!

Hm. Good. We don't need it.

I was so proud of her.

Aside

“SOLUS GOT ARRESTED? Really?”

“Yes... He and his men were handed over to the Adventurer’s Guild.”

“How on earth... And the potion?”

“Taken with him, of course.”

“Damn it! After I came all the way to Ulmutt to receive it personally?!”

“How much of the concoction do we have left?”

“Not much... I had thought we could resupply through Bulbola.”

“Not since the Tormeo Trade Association closed down. We haven’t been able to reach Zelyse either...”

“How could it close down? I thought the count’s son was backing it.”

“We were only dealing in contraband! How did they get charged with treason?!”

“In any case, we don’t have enough of the concoction.”

“I see... I don’t suppose we could make more if we returned to the capital?”

“No! We only have a few days left. The thing might go berserk by then.”

“Tch...”

“*He* is going to be so angry with us when he gets wind of this! What should we do?”

“I have some information which may be of use.”

“What? Did you figure out another way to get more potions?”

“No. The adventurer who captured Solus was a little girl. A Black Cat at that.”

“Are you kidding me? Solus is stronger than all of us.”

“These are the facts. People are calling this girl the Swordceress.”

“Swordceress?”

“Yes. A mere Black Cat girl cannot be strong enough to go toe-to-toe with Solus. Therefore, the secret to her strength must lie in her magic sword.”

“She sounds a lot like the girl Seldio approached outside the city gates... She was a Black Cat too.”

“Probably the same one. Even Seldio recognized the strength of her sword.”

“You think he would forgive us if we give it to him?”

“Yes... Maybe he’ll forget about our failures altogether.”

“Right? Then we have to get that sword, by hook or by crook. We’ll send Seldio and Dahlum after Solus.”

“Seldio? Are you sure? He might expose our existence if he fails.”

“We would be arrested regardless. That’s why we have to make sure that he succeeds.”

“All right. I’ll coordinate with Seldio and Dahlum. I trust you have Solus under control?”

“Yeah. It’s a good thing I brought my Sword.”

Chapter 3: New Quests, New Goals

THE DAY AFTER the Ulmutt dungeon...

“Frannie, wait up!”

“Hm?”

Fran was walking down the labyrinthine streets when a voice called out to her. I didn’t need to see to know who it belonged to.

“Good morning, Fran!”

Elza. She barreled toward Fran, bulging muscles tight against her armor, looking terrifying as always. Jet echoed my sentiments by tucking his tail between his legs. He knew who the alpha was here. Fran was the only one unfazed by Elza’s sudden appearance.

“What is it, Elza?”

“There’s someone who wants to see you. He asked me to come get you.”

“Meet me? Who?”

“That’s right! He’s heard about you from your adventures in town! He said he would love to meet the Swordceress in person!”

The way Elza put it made it sound like this man wasn’t an adventurer. He might be a politician or a noble, if he was able to send Elza on errands.

“What kind of person is he?”

“Don’t worry, he’s not bad. He used to be an adventurer himself, so he’s not one for formalities. He’s the head of the

beastmen in this town. It would be good for you to know him."

A politician then. Not an aristocrat by birth, but someone who held sway over the city. And he was a beastman? I couldn't believe he would want to meet a Black Cat.

But Elza knows him, thought Fran.

A good point.

I guess she wouldn't introduce you to anyone weird.

Hm.

Still, I'm amazed Elza's already gained your trust.

Yeah?

Fran tilted her head. Elza took it as a gesture of concern.

"Now, I know you're worried."

We would be well within our rights.

"Which is why *I'm* coming with you! Don't worry, if he tries anything funny, I'll crush him real good!"

Crush what?

"Aarf..."

Oh, Elza, you scared Jet. It's okay boy, you're all right. Still, I supposed it would be safe to meet this person if Elza was coming with us. If things went south, we could always ask Dias to mediate.

"All right, I'll see him."

"Thanks, honey! I'll lead the way."

"Hm."

"Hope you don't mind taking a shortcut!" Elza said, preparing to jump.

Running from rooftop to rooftop was a good way of navigating this labyrinthine town. I hoped we wouldn't piss anyone off in the process, but then again, I didn't think anybody in town would want to pick a fight with Elza, making for a much quicker journey.

Elza dashing across the rooftops of Ulmutt was a sight to behold. Every time she hopped from one house to another, I was worried the roof wouldn't hold. One house made some ominous creaking noises when she landed on it, scaring some children inside. I couldn't take my eyes off her!

"Over here!"

"Hm."

But Fran carried on, cool as a cucumber.

Ten minutes later, we reached the gates of a large estate. The manor was luxurious, clearly the dwelling place of nobility. Two beastmen soldiers stood guard at the front gate.

"This the place?"

"Yep. This is Old Aurel's house. Hey there!"

"Lady Elza! It has been too long. Please come inside."

Elza waved at the guards, who responded by standing at attention and saluting. The adventurers clearly weren't the only ones who respected her—the guards seemed to share that same reverence.

"Don't mind if I do. The girl and her wolf are with me."

"Ma'am!"

Elza led Fran along a stone path between the gate and the mansion.

"I did a lot of missions for Old Aurel, and he took a liking to me. I can come and go as I want."

“This place is huge.”

“Woof.”

“He was a B-Rank adventurer in his prime. He used to personally serve the king.”

Old Aurel sounded like a hero from a folktale, not the kind of person Fran would get along with normally. If things got hairy, we might have to make up some kind of reason to leave.

The garden was huge, and we still hadn't reached the mansion. Flowers of many colors grew among fountains and statues. A garden showcased its owner's tastes, and this one was artfully arranged. Elza identified the flowers by name as we passed, and told Fran of their special uses. This one was used in perfume, and the essential oil from that one was excellent as moisturizer. Fran was completely uninterested.

We reached the mansion, and Elza threw open the doors without so much as a knock. She wasn't kidding when she said she could come and go as she pleased.

“Here I am, Old Man!”

“Welcome, Lady Elza.”

“Oh, hello, Shalla,” said Elza, making conversation with the maid who welcomed us. “It's been a while. How is that moisturizer working out?”

“It is keeping my skin in excellent condition, ma'am.”

“Shalla, where is Old Aurel?”

“He is relaxing on the terrace.”

“Thank you, dear. Come on, Fran.”

“Hm.”

Elza refused Shalla's offer to escort us, and led the way to the terrace.

The interior of the mansion was just as opulent, and spacious too. Expensive paintings decorated the walls, and beautiful pots housed lively flowers. The terrace was located on the second floor. The mansion's great height allowed us to see the whole of Ulmutt from here. Even Fran and Jet were impressed.

"Whoa."

"Woof."

They ran to the balustrade and looked out with gleaming eyes, completely ignoring the graying old man who was definitely the lord of the mansion. Fortunately, the old man only smiled magnanimously at Fran's childlike wonder.

"Hahaha. Like what you see?"

"Hm! It's amazing!"

"Woof."

The old man seemed to be just as impressed with the view. The dungeon city looked much grander from up here.

"Good. The name's Widget Aurel of the White Dogs. May I have your name, little miss?"

"Hm. Black Cat Fran. This is Jet."

"Woof!"

"Thank you for accepting my invitation. Please, have a seat."

Old Aurel was intimidating, though in a different way from Elza. He had the presence of a mafia don, emphasized by his baritone voice. Despite getting along in years, he still retained an imposing posture.

“Old Aurel’s actually over seventy years old!” said Elza. “Can you believe it? How does he always look so fresh?”

“Hah! That’s easy. I always have a goal I’m working toward and I work so hard I forget to age, that’s all.” Aurel grinned stoically.

H-he was so cool. The kind of old man all men look up to. The model of graceful aging.

“Here. Try this one, it’s real good. One of my favorites.”

“Hm.”

Aurel gave us recommendations for the tea and crumpets his maid brought. He knew what he was talking about too. Fran gobbled up the cookies and asked for another cup of tea.

“We brew this with the finest of Chromian leaves. I needed a hobby when I realized I was getting old. This is the only thing I enjoy.”

Tea was his only hobby?

“What about the pictures and the flowers?”

“I let my gardener do what he wants with the garden. If I managed it myself, it’d turn into a jungle in a week. I buy whatever the art merchants recommend. Visuals are a huge part of being a politician unfortunately.” Aurel laughed. As a former adventurer, perhaps he would’ve preferred a much simpler house.

“Why did you call me here?”

“Hahaha! You get right to the point. No reason really. Just wanted to see this Swordceress with my own eyes.”

“Like I said earlier,” said Elza, “Aurel’s the representative for the beastmen in town. He was interested in you.”

"I didn't do much to get the role of representative. Living in Ulmutt for the better part of fifty years will do that to anyone. I know a lot of people, that's all."

Was that really it? No shady dealings? Fran had warned me not to use it...but I needed to use Essence of Falsehood again. Just in case.

"I heard rumors about a strong beastgirl. I had to see her for myself."

"So what do you think of Fran?" Elza asked. "Cute, isn't she? And real strong too!"

"If you say she is, then she is. I don't remember the last time I met a kid who wasn't afraid of me. I like you."

He was telling the truth.

"I guess the rumors were true," Aurel said. "Not that I had much reason to doubt Elza's endorsement."

What rumors? Before we could ask, Aurel elaborated. The Swordceress was far stronger than her D-Rank suggested. She was merciless to her enemies, Elza had taken a liking to her, she wielded an enchanted sword like it was an extension of her own limbs, and her real strength was closer to a B-Rank. These rumors circulated through the usual network of talking merchants. Most of them were true. Still, Fran remained suspicious.

"I'm a Black Cat. Do you still buy it?"

Fran would not forgive anyone for belittling her race. But she was also aware of how low the Black Cats were in the beastman hierarchy, which was why she had to hold her ground.

Aurel only snorted in response. "And? You're saying all Black Cats are weak? I had the pleasure of running into a terrifyingly strong Black Cat when I was younger. It happened right in these dungeons."

“Really?” said Elza. “I never heard that story.”

“Because I never told you.”

“Where are they now?” Fran insisted.

This was the first time she’d heard of a strong Black Cat, aside from herself. Inina was pretty strong by Black Cat standards, but she was nothing compared to Fran. But for a former B-Rank like Aurel to claim that they were “terrifyingly strong”...?

Fran had to know.

“Where are they?” said Aurel. “I’d like to know myself.”

“Okay, what were they like?”

“Can’t remember. This happened fifty-three years ago.”

Lie. But why dodge the subject? Did they die in the dungeons? Aurel looked gloomy and clearly didn’t want to talk about it.

“Oh...”

“Anyway, feel free to namedrop me if the beastmen in town give you any trouble. Should work most of the time. And feel free to come over if something’s on your mind.”

Aurel was willing to go out of his way to do us favors. Still, it was best not to bring up his old Black Cat comrade again. We might spoil whatever goodwill the man had for us.

“Which reminds me, we’ve taken care of Inina’s body. We buried her this morning.”

“Thank you.”

That was fast. Was there no funeral? Maybe being buried in an adventurers’ cemetery took the place of one. But even veteran adventurer Elza thought things were proceeding too fast.

“Already? But Fran wanted to say her last goodbyes.”

“Hm?” said Fran. “I already did, so I’m good.”

“Are you sure, honey?”

“You’re a Granzellian born and raised, Elza,” Aurel said. “Allow me to explain.”

When a beastman died, his soul immediately ascended to heaven. That was the moment when his friends grieved for him. Beastman custom didn’t place a high value on the body without a soul, which nullified the need for a funeral. They were still held, though mostly to console the friends and family.

“The beastmen tribes have been a warrior race since the age of the gods. As such, we tend to die on the battlefield. Holding a funeral in the middle of battle is a little tricky, so we say our goodbyes to our fallen comrades right then and there. Our comrades wouldn’t mind if we used their bodies as meat shields, and we wouldn’t mind if the same thing happened to us.”

The beastmen were a very practical race. I guess that was a given, considering how many wars they’d been in. That meant Fran had mourned Inina when she found her lying dead in the dungeon.

“I do have a request for you, though,” said Aurel. “If you don’t mind.”

A quest? That was sudden. Aurel had barely known Fran a day.

“What is it?”

Aurel took something out of his pocket and placed it on the table. A pendant?

“Delivery. The destination is very close. Elza should be able to finish it by the end of the day.”

“Then why not ask Elza?”

“Because I want *you* to do it. How about it?”

Aurel looked into Fran’s eyes.

“All right.” Fran nodded without consulting me. A rare occurrence. His request worried me, since I couldn’t get a read on him, but Fran clearly wanted to take it.

“Very well,” said Aurel. “Your quest is to deliver this to a certain individual.”

Aurel had prepared this beforehand, and fully intended for Fran to deliver it, should she meet his standards. Fran took the pendant. It was a plain-looking piece with a black stone set in the center. We weren’t going to tamper with the pendant, but it could open like a locket.

I didn’t feel any mana running through it, which meant that it was nothing more than a cheap trinket. Not exactly something that needed protection, but Aurel’s following statement almost made me jump out of my sheath.

“You will deliver the pendant to the master of the East Dungeon.”

Excuse me?!

“The Dungeon Master?”

I almost broadcast my surprise over Telepathy! He wanted us to give this to a Dungeon Master?

Aurel nodded in response, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “That’s right. You have to make sure that you give it to them yourself.”

“How?”

“*That* is part of your quest.”

How were we supposed to give stuff to a Dungeon Master? I remembered that Dias had struck a deal with them. We’d need to talk to him before we set out.

“They should be in the dungeon’s deepest level. You can get there, can’t you?”

Fran rose to Aurel’s challenge immediately. “Hm! Of course!”

I couldn’t imagine how this quest would end, let alone begin.

We left Aurel’s estate after that. As we made our way to the Adventurer’s Guild, Fran apologized—her ears pressed flat to her head.

I’m sorry.

Huh? About what?

About taking the quest without asking you.

So that’s what was bothering her.

I’m a little uneasy about it, but I don’t mind as long as you want to do this.

Thanks.

You sure have taken a liking to that old man.

Aurel was a good man with a generous spirit. Fran got along with people like him, but I didn’t think she’d immediately take a quest from him. I was glad to see Fran had cheered up since Inina’s death, but I was still curious. As it turned out, however, Fran hadn’t taken on the quest out of the goodness of her heart.

That old man has evolved.

What? Really?

He was an evolved White Dog. A White Wolf.

But he said he was a White Dog. Aurel had introduced himself as Widget Aurel of the White Dogs.

You’re still a White Dog even after you’ve evolved into a White Wolf.

I see. So you'll still be Black Cat Fran even after you evolve?

Yeah.

But how did you know he was evolved?

Beastmen have a feel for these things.

Really?

Pretty much.

The instinct sounded like it was innate to beastmen.

I'll ask him how to evolve. But we have to finish this quest first.

So that's your plan.

"Hm."

Fran had thought things through before accepting this quest.

"What's wrong, honey?"

"Nothing."

"You sure?"

We took Elza's rooftop shortcut on our return trip, too, asking her about the Dungeon Master as we did. She told us a lot of things as we passed by people drying their laundry on the rooftops, giving some of them the scare of their lives. Meeting the Dungeon Master would be more difficult than we imagined. Even Elza had yet to meet the creature in person.

"I think you should tell the GM about your quest. It'll count toward your rank up if it's recognized by the guild."

"Really?"

"Getting to the deepest level is easy enough, but that's no guarantee that the reclusive Dungeon Master will see

you. I think our GM is the only one who's guaranteed an audience."

Was this quest actually possible?

"Hrmph."

We've already accepted. We just need to figure out a way to finish it.

Had Aurel tasked Fran with an impossible quest? But there were no penalties—all we'd have to do is log the quest as a failure. Not that we had any intention of doing that.

We reached the guild and immediately went to see Dias. Meeting the Guildmaster was difficult under regular conditions, but Elza enjoyed special perks. If she wanted to see the Guildmaster, she would see the Guildmaster.

We found Dias doing paperwork for once. Despite our short time in Ulmutt, we had already decided that he wasn't the sort to do actually do office work. I'd have thought he'd be out for a walk at this hour. Elza gasped, obviously thinking the same thing.

"What's this? I didn't think you'd be in."

"I don't make the rounds every day, you know. Did you need something?"

"Yes, it's about Fran."

"Go on."

Dias turned his attention to Fran, who told him about Aurel's request. She was mostly excited about the tea and sweets, but finished with a brief mention of the quest.

"I see. So you've met Aurel..."

"Friend of yours?"

"Kind of. It's a small town, you run into the same people every day. But that quest..."

"I couldn't tell what the old man wanted from her. Any guesses, GM?"

"Oh...Aurel..." Dias muttered, thinking to himself.

"Hm?"

"Nothing, never mind. I'll authorize this quest in your log. But do be careful. You are not to harm the Dungeon Master in any way, shape, or form. If you do, we will not hesitate to execute you, understand?"

"Got it."

We had learned a lot the past few days, so we knew the stakes. If we attacked the Dungeon Master, Ulmutt might be destroyed.

"She can be difficult to handle. If you *do* meet her, do not upset her."

So the Dungeon Master was female?

"She?"

"Ah. I've said too much. You'll see for yourself. It isn't my place to say."

"All right."

After our meeting, we went to look up information on the Dungeon Master, but mostly came up dry. All we had to go on was that she liked to remain hidden, was female, and could talk. We looked up the West Dungeon's Dungeon Master to see if we could draw parallels, but information there was just as sparse. The West seemed to be an auxiliary dungeon, which had a dungeon boss but no Dungeon Master. East and West might be governed by the same person. No one could really tell us more than that, since getting to the deepest level alone was an arduous task.

We'll just have to go there and see.

"Hm."

We'd already decided to go deeper into the East Dungeon anyway.

How does it look, Fran?

"Hm."

Five days since we arrived in Ulmutt, on the fourteenth floor of the East Dungeon.

We were hunting monsters and honing our trap skills. We had to complete Aurel's quest, but there wasn't much point in rushing through and injuring ourselves.

Fran was doing battle with a trap. The deeper we went into the dungeon, the more of them there were, and the more complex their workings. For example, multiple wires which were actually red herrings—the trap wouldn't trigger if you didn't mess with its inner mechanism. We also had to be careful with arrows, which could activate other traps.

Deadly poison and teleportation traps were much more frequent now. Movement Seal and Presence Sense Seal traps also made their debut. Not that it affected us, since we had Seal Immunity.

The Guildmaster might have struck a deal with the Dungeon Master, but a dungeon was still a dungeon. This was not going to be a walk in the park.

"Hm... I got it."

Yeah? Let's see it.

Fran had perfectly dismantled the trap.

Not only were there more of them now, but the monsters had sense, detection, and trap skills now too. While not impressive from a raw stats perspective, these creatures were able to use the dungeon's darkness and traps to their advantage. But, thanks to their crystals, my skill

levels were steadily increasing. I now had Omni Radar 4, Being Sense 4, and Disarm Trap 4. We had an abundance of traps to practice on too. Fran's skill in handling them had come along nicely. The new magicks we absorbed in Bulbola, Frost Magic and Steel Magic, were quite handy in disarming them too.

That said, we couldn't make much use of Moonlight Magic. Moon Phase boosted stats, but only at night, while Night Vision gave us better vision in the dark for a while. Honestly, they were a little lackluster, but we still needed to level it up to get the magic reflection spells later on.

For now, Frost and Steel was where it was at.

Freezing the inside of a trap with Frost Magic slowed down the trigger mechanism. It also completely deactivated any explosives. Steel Magic was even more useful. It could manipulate the steel inside a trap to render it harmless. You could also use it to weld the steel parts together and stop the mechanism from firing. Still, while Fran had dramatically improved her disarming skills, she wasn't perfect. Even now, she groaned as she noticed her mistake.

"Ah."

Short Jump!

"Woof!"

Water bullets shot out at dangerous speeds toward the place we were standing. A direct hit, especially to the head, would've been lethal, not to mention that water projectiles were difficult to see.

"Sorry."

Guess you haven't completely mastered it.

"Hm."

There was no choice with these traps though. Either solve them or turn back.

Aside from completing Aurel's task, we had four goals: One, we needed to level up; two, we needed to complete our rank-up quest; three, we had to train our neglected skills, and four, we needed to get our hands on a skill that would protect us against abilities that worked on the mind.

Coercive Influence and Mental Suggestion were our primary concern. We needed a skill that would protect us against that kind of subtle manipulation. Those sorts of skills weren't classified as status ailments, since their effect to a target's mind was so subtle. That made them difficult to detect—downright impossible if the user were any good with them.

We had fallen victim to mental manipulation twice since arriving in Ulmutt. Something needed to be done. I thought perhaps we could get the manatech equivalent of a tinfoil hat, but those weren't readily available. We visited all the manatech shops Elza suggested but came up dry. Pieces that could block high-level mental manipulation were extremely costly, and we wouldn't be able to afford one even if we found one.

This meant we needed a skill.

We spent thirty minutes in the guild archives looking for a monster with just such a skill, and got a lot more information than I initially thought. A lot of data about monster appearances had been gathered in the long years since the pact with the Dungeon Master. Everything from spawn locations to weak points and dropped materials. Adventurers who possessed Identify went one further and listed all the skills each monster had as well. I figured out there was a particular monster lurking in the depths which had the skill that we wanted, and there was.

The skill was called Mental Disruption.

The ability to disrupt skills such as Mental Suggestion. The monster that possessed it was completely unaffected by mental manipulation. In order to gain it, we would have to traverse the depths of this dungeon—all the way to the eighteenth floor. We could finish Aurel's quest while we were at it. Two birds with one stone.

It had only been two days since we set our sights on clearing this dungeon and already the stairs to the fourteenth floor stood before us.

We were making pretty good progress, thanks to that all-too-useful skill, Pocket Dimension. It meant we could store a large amount of food without being encumbered by its weight. The same applied to the various monster materials we'd picked up along the way. Pocket Dimension made dungeon crawling a lot easier.

Other adventurers had to carve monsters for materials on the spot. As such, they only brought back the most valuable pieces. Carving took time, and the more items you had, the heavier your inventory became.

The deeper you got into the dungeon, the tougher the monsters and the more complex the traps. As a result, the lower levels took a long time to clear. Not to mention monster parts had a habit of decomposing over time. You wouldn't usually spend too much time in a dungeon, and very few adventurers tried to clear it. Even fewer traversed its treacherous depths daily.

Physical limits weren't the only things that barred an adventurer's progress. Monsters lurked around every dark corner, and people needed to be careful even as they ate, so as not to attract undue attention. Dungeon crawling was nerve-racking business, and many quit early. Motivation was not an infinite resource, so that became the primary obstacle.

Fran and Jet did not have these disadvantages. They traveled on delicious food, and had access to a fluffy bed in the event they got tired. Their standard of living was on a whole other level. Fran and Jet were also battle junkies, so the tougher the monsters got, the more motivated they became. All it took to raise their spirits was a good fight. Fran's eyes gleamed with desire.

"I'll kill them in one hit."

"Woof!"

As we walked down the stairs to the fourteenth floor, we were greeted by large shadows.

High Ogres.

The elite race of ogre. They were close to four meters tall, with skin like iron wrapped around their bulging muscles. The weapons they wielded only added to their menacing presence. A giant steel club. A great mace whose business end was as big as a barrel. The High Ogres handled these terrible weapons like they were swinging a stick. I didn't expect to run into these musclebound monsters here.

These guys would make a tough fight, since we'd just gotten through the thirteenth floor. Thanks to their regenerative capacity, they could even survive a wound that left their guts exposed. Fran was vexed that they had startled her, and was set on killing them all.

I guess there aren't any traps in this room.

The High Ogre was the only monster in this dungeon that couldn't navigate around traps. Therefore, a room with High Ogres couldn't have them. The musclebrains would trigger them and get themselves killed.

Still, they were powerful enough to make a D-Rank sweat.

Under normal circumstances, we could easily take them head on, and things would be much easier now that we didn't have to worry about traps. So long as Fran didn't insist on killing them all with her sword, a few spells would make short work of them.

Let's go!

"Hm."

"Grrrrr!"

We used the element of surprise to our advantage. If we took too long, the fighting would attract other monsters. Jet bared his fangs at the High Ogre to his right and leapt at it.

"Raaargh!"

Then, arrows started falling.

Whoa! Air Shield!

"Urrrf?"

I popped a spell by reflex as Jet retreated to the shadows. So there *were* traps in this room. The arrows bounced harmlessly off of the ogres' iron hides.

That was how they dealt with them. The traps might be harmless to them, but they were quite dangerous for us. This dungeon kept getting worse!

Let's take care of these bastards quick!

"Hm!"

I thought a spell would make quick work of them, but decided against it. Fran would definitely sulk if I blew them all up and robbed her of a chance to swing her sword.

Jet and I will take half of them. You take the other two!

"Hm."

Inferno Burst!

"Groaaar!"

I fired my flame spell at a High Ogre and watched it burn to ashes. Jet jumped out of the shadows and skewered another with a shadow spear.

“Oooorgh!”

“Too slow! Haaa!”

Fran dodged the ogre’s club and used Air Hop to get some height. She prepared her Pressurized Quickdraw to chop the ogre’s barrel-thick neck. She decapitated it, and blood gushed out of the stump. Its head fell to the dungeon floor with a loud thud. Even a High Ogre couldn’t recover from that.

Fran turned her attention to the last one. This time, she was less theatrical in her disposal. She dodged its attacks as she drew closer, and jammed me right into the creature’s crystal, near its heart. So long as you weren’t picky, this was the fastest way to kill something.

I guess High Ogres aren’t an indication that there are no traps here...

“Just the way I like it.”

Fran puffed her chest confidently. The harder the dungeon got, the more motivated she was.

The traps will only get more dangerous from here. Stay on your toes.

“Hm.”

You, too, Jet. Don’t let that happen again.

“Arf...”

We carried on with a newfound alertness, and found a trap we had never seen before.

“There’s a weird line here.”

Good eye... I can barely see it.

“Is this a trap too?”

It was an infrared beam, like the ones you see in the movies. Although it wasn't technically infrared, since we could see it with our bare eyes... I wondered what kind of trap this would trigger.

“Should I try tripping it?”

Yeah...it'd be nice to know what it does.

We got as much distance as we could. Then, I generated a clone of myself and sent it to activate the trap.

That's it?

No arrows, no pitfalls. No jutting spears or bursts of gas either.

“I hear something.”

What?

Rumble...

A heavy grinding noise came from deeper in the dungeon. It sounded like the gears of an old elevator. Still, we didn't know what'd happened. I examined the room before Fran pointed to the path leading out.

“The walls are moving.”

What?

She was right. The wall at the end of the path was sliding aside. What used to be a straight path out was now a right turn. This particular trap made the dungeon more mazelike, and its chief aim was to lead adventurers down the wrong path. I didn't know such a thing even existed.

We could see the trap with our naked eye though, so it was easy to avoid, as long as we were careful. We just needed to figure out a way to disarm it. Or so I thought.

Rumble...

The noise returned.

“Teacher?”

But I got rid of my clone! Jet?

“Bark bark bark!”

Jet shook his head in frantic denial, but the walls continued moving. The one on the left disappeared to reveal another path, and another High Ogre.

The High Ogre triggered it!

The High Ogres and the traps on this floor were made for each other. No matter how careful we were, the careless ogres would eventually run into the traps. Alternatively, they could be activated by other adventurers.

“Raaaargh!”

The creature roared.

We need to get rid of him!

“Hm!”

This dungeon is a pain in the ass!

But it was only the sign of what the dungeon had in store for us. Once we got to the fifteenth floor, the number of trap-triggering monsters increased dramatically.

Particularly frustrating was the creature called Mist. It was a gaseous monster which was difficult to detect, and couldn't be harmed by physical means in its dissipated state. However, it could also become solid enough to activate traps. As a result, Mists became the primary headache.

By the time we got to the eighteenth floor, these creatures had tripped over thirty traps. Even Fran couldn't hide her exhaustion. We had an awful time, before we figured out a simple way to get rid of them.

The method was easy enough. Before entering a new room, we'd clear it with a well-placed area of effect spell. Even if the creatures concealed themselves, our spells covered enough ground to snuff them out in their hiding spots. Mists weren't known for their durability—two to three spells were all it took. Sometimes we would even get the added benefit of tripping whatever traps were waiting for us inside. A two-for-one deal.

The only downside to this strategy was that we got zero practice time. But now was the time to prioritize our own safety, especially since these floors spawned the monster we were looking for: a small black ball of light called the Dirty Wisp. The creature that possessed the skills to resist mental manipulation.

We'll have to hold off on clearing entire rooms with spells for now. We'll figure something out.

"All right."

We were moving much slower now in an effort to be more careful. The monster we're looking for would be a much bigger hassle than Mists.

"Grr!"

What is it, Jet?

"Arf!"

Jet growled and barked at a bit of wall before firing a shadow spear at it. Now that I got a closer look, there was definitely something odd about it.

"Skreeeee!"

Ew, gross!

A purple and orange maggot, definitely venomous.

The maggot was impaled to the wall, spasming, with black fluid frothing from its mouth. A pungent stink wafted

out of the hole Jet's shadow spear had left in its guts.

That was close. You didn't sense this thing, Fran?

"Nope."

"Grrr!"

Mimic Venomcrawler.

Possessing Camouflage, Conceal Presence, and Hush, the beast relied on stealth and patience to hunt its prey. With Venomfang, Poison Magic, and Venom Spray, the maggot was practically made of poison. Jet only noticed it thanks to his sharp nose.

According to the archives, the Venomcrawler was the number one monster you needed to keep an eye out for, beating even the High Ogre in terms of casualties. I immediately saw why. It was impossibly stealthy and dangerously venomous. If the maggot got the drop on you, you'd be pretty dead. Even mid-rank adventurers would have a hard time spotting them.

However, the Venomcrawler's parts were highly valued. It turned out that we had four requests for Mimic Venomcrawler parts: Skin, Venom Sac, Venom Fang, and Meat.

I couldn't imagine eating this thing myself, but apparently it was a delicacy. Failure to remove the creature's venom from the flesh would result in gastronomic catastrophe, so I guess it was the fugu of this world.

We're counting on you, Jet!

"You can do it."

"Arf?"

Jet's nose knows where to go!

Two hours later, with Maggot Killer Jet leading the way, our exploration of the eighteenth floor was going smoothly.

He had already killed around ten venomous maggots, so we were in high spirits. But then I spotted something that was cause for even more excitement.

Treasure chest!

“Hm.”

The first treasure chest of the day.

Ulmutt’s dungeons were famous for spawning chests. The Dungeon Master didn’t mind cutting adventurers a break, since they had already forged a deal with the Guildmaster. The chests in the upper levels contained mostly potions, while the lower levels contained magic equipment. We had already picked up some potions on our way here.

A treasure chest on the eighteenth floor. I wonder what’s in it!

We weren’t going to open it immediately of course. The thing was obviously rigged. My guess was some sort of acid trap. Once activated, acid would spray all over the party, and would sometimes dissolve whatever was inside the treasure chest too.

An awful trap indeed.

“I’ll disarm it.”

Sure. Be careful.

“Got it!”

Fran couldn’t wait to get her hands on it. She examined the box and its surroundings—knocking the adjacent floor and walls to listen for anything strange. Then she took out her disarming tool, cast the appropriate spells, and calmly dismantled the trap. Her focus was always a pleasure to see

—she usually had such a short attention span. I only wished she could focus during her studies.

“Done!”

That was fast.

“I’m getting better at this!”

Fran excitedly opened the chest. Inside, we found an interesting piece of equipment: a fist weapon for martial artists. The gauntlet was made of black metal plates and ran from the back of your hand to your upper arm, and it came with a belt to adjust the size. Three beastly claws curved out of the arm guard, each twenty centimeters long.

Name: Captive Claws

Attack: 230; MP: 100; Durability: 700

Mana Conductivity: D+

Skill: Paralyze

You could retract its claws by feeding mana through it, making it convenient for everyday use. Its ability to inflict Paralyze also made it highly useful in battle. We couldn’t use it, but it should sell for a decent price.

Still, Fran had something else on her mind.

“Teacher, do you think Jet can use this?”

What? Hmm, now that you mention it...

The claws could change size, depending on the user. Even its braces got larger or smaller depending on the user’s hands. They should fit perfectly on Jet’s front paws.

Fran, try equipping it on him.

“Hm. Jet, show me your paws.”

“Woof!”

“The right one first.”

“Arf.”

Fran tugged on Jet’s right paw and equipped him with the claw. There was no problem with the fit. The Captive Claw’s size-adjustment feature kicked in, confirming Jet as its new user. He posed triumphantly, proud of his new gear. His enthusiasm was only betrayed by his tail wagging so hard it made a breeze.

Looking good, Jet.

“So cool.”

“Arf, arf!”

How does it feel? Are they awkward to walk around in?

“Arf? Bark, bark!”

No problems there, either.



Jet activated the retractable claws with his mana, pulling them in and out of the bracers. While the claws' attack value wasn't too high, it was still better than Jet's bare paws. Paralysis worked perfectly with his hit and run style of fighting too. He could slow them down, and then move in for the kill.

Jet was ecstatic with his newfound toy. He couldn't wait to get his paws on some monsters. Promoted from Maggot Killer to Monster Exterminator, Jet led the charge, practically skipping with joy. The only action Fran and I saw was when we ran into High Ogres.

Soon, we reached the stairs leading down to the nineteenth floor. This dungeon might have been designed for our direwolf.

"What now, Teacher?"

We're already here so let's keep going. Dirty Wisps spawn on the nineteenth floor, too, and we've already collected everything we needed from the maggots. No point in going through here again.

"Hm. All right."

But just as we were about to descend the stairs...

"Arf?"

What is it, Jet?

"Woof, woof!"

It looked like he was barking at a stone step, but his maxed out detection skills told me there was something there.

"Bark!"

Jet launched a pitch-black spear at the step. Didn't I just see this happen a while ago?

"Aaaaaaaa!"

His attack hit something, and that something wailed as it ejected itself from the step. The thing looked like a glowing, black bowling ball. Its contours were vague and hazy, and it looked like it might disappear if you took your eyes off it. This was the creature we had been looking for.

That's a Dirty Wisp!

They'd finally made their appearance.

Upon Identification, its health and strength turned out to be lower than your garden-variety goblin. However, its magic and agility were more than enough to get it boosted to a D-Threat. It had a multitude of skills too: Wind Magic, Conceal Presence, Thought Disruption, Mental Status Resistance, Mana Drain, Dark Magic, and Dark Resistance.

It must've used magic to hide in the darkness of the stairwell. Jet knew something was there because he used the spell in the same way. The Dirty Wisp could've gotten the jump on us if not for Jet, and I doubt we would be in good condition to fight it.

Good job, Jet! I'll give you a treat later.

"Arf? Bark bark!"

I'll bring out the ultrahot curry for you, sure!

"Arooooo!"

"Hrmph. I can't slack off either."

Upon hearing Jet's reward, Fran readied me.

Time to get that crystal!

"Hm!"

We were after the Dirty Wisp's Thought Disruption skill. We'd come this far, we wouldn't let it go to waste.

Jet, cover it so it can't run off.

"Woof!"

“Haaa!”

Fran slashed at the Dirty Wisp, despite the awkward footing.

“Aaaaa!”

“Hrm.”

But my blade passed harmlessly through its body. Was it Dark Magic? It was able to momentarily lose its physical form to evade damage.

“Fire Arrow!”

“Aaa!”

Damn it! This thing’s fast.

That applied to both its movement and cast speed. The moment Fran launched her Fire Arrow, the wisp threw up a Dark Shield.

Fire Arrow.

“Fire Arrow.”

Fire Arrow.

Time to overwhelm the wisp’s protection with a barrage of spells! The Dark Wisp’s defense was soon broken by thirty flaming bolts. It wasn’t getting away now! Or so I thought...

“Aa—”

It disappeared... No, it teleported!

The wisp faded and reappeared some three meters away. Fortunately, it wasn’t able to teleport over long distances, but this was still a pain. If killing it were our main objective, we could unload our area of effect spells ...

But we had the crystal to think about, and powerful spells tended to destroy crystal along with the monster. Bigger, higher leveled creatures would have larger and more durable crystal. The Dirty Wisp was not such a monster. I

wasn't expecting much out of its crystal, aside from that skill.

In that case—

We have to kill it before it gets away!

"Hm."

First, we needed to restrict its movement.

"Groar!"

Fire Arrow.

"Aaaa—"

The wisp moved through the shadows to dodge our attacks. What it lacked in skills, it more than made up for in cast time. But it shouldn't be able to teleport multiple times in a row. We just needed to predict where it was going and kill it.

Thanks to Fran's levelled-up detection skills, she could do exactly that. The dungeon's training finally paid off, and she anticipated the exact location. Fran leaped to the wisp's destination.

"Haaa!"

Her right hand flashed and, now that I was imbued with fire, I cut easily cut through the Dirty Wisp. I felt its crystal surge through me.

"Aaaaaaaaaa!"

The black sphere let out an ear-splitting shriek and faded away. The fact that the creature left nothing but its crystal behind might be part of the reason why there were so few sightings.

Nice, I have Thought Disruption now!

"Hm!"

Let's keep hunting wisps so we can level it up more!

“Woof!”

Three hours after our first encounter with a Dirty Wisp...

Time for dinner, you two.

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

We were camping out in a safe corner of the nineteenth floor.

Once we’d checked that the room was clear of traps, Jet and I cast five layers of barriers. Only then did I take out Fran’s bed. Since I didn’t need any sleep, I could keep watch all night and both of my party members had proven that their senses were far more sensitive than mine. We should have no trouble spotting a stealthy monster or the odd rogue adventurer.

“Munch munch munch!”

“Gobble gobble gobble!”

Fran sat on the bed and ate her curry. Tonight she was having fried chicken chunks, cheese-filled salisbury, and fried pork cutlet. Jet laid at her feet, chowing down on his ultrahot curry. His mouth was slathered with it. We would need to clean him up later. Fran hummed and dangled her legs. At times, she’d use her feet to fluff Jet’s fur.

We had accomplished our goal of defeating a Dirty Wisp and acquiring Thought Disruption. With Fran at Level 44, you could say our expedition was a success. Tomorrow, we would make our way to the twentieth floor, and Fran should hit Level 45, her level cap.

I didn’t want to be a wet rag, but it needed to be said...

Fran, can I talk to you for a bit?

“Hm?”

You're almost Level 45.

"Hm."

And according to Identify, Level 45 is the highest you can go.

The insurmountable wall that no Black Cat had ever surpassed. This was her level cap.

"I know."

So, uh...

I wanted to tell Fran my predictions about her level. It was a difficult subject to approach, but I thought it best to be honest, so I steeled my heart and told her.

Even if you hit Level 45, I don't think that's going to be enough for you to evolve.

The Black Cats might be weak, but some of them could still fight. I doubted none of them had ever hit Level 45 before, which meant that maxing-out your level was not the sole requirement for evolution. At least, that was my conclusion. I was expecting Fran to take the news poorly, but it turned out she had already come to a similar conclusion.

"Hm."

She nodded, keeping her composure.

"Some of the other tribes have special requirements to evolve too. The fox beastmen are the best example," she explained.

For a Silver Fox to evolve, they needed to be at a high enough level *and* learn a special skill called Fox Fire. The Black Cats might have similar special requirements.

"I'm fuzzy on the details, but I hear that White Wolves undergo a special kind of evolution too."

Really?

“That’s what I wanted to ask Aurel. He might give me a clue.”

And that’s why you took his offer.

“Hm.”

Fran had been thinking about evolution all her life. She knew a lot more about this stuff than I ever could.

Let’s look for that skill then.

“Hm!”

Fran hadn’t lost a single ounce of motivation. If anything, she might be more driven now that she was so close to hitting the cap.

“I’ll evolve and show everyone.”

Yeah! That’s the spirit!

Aside

“TH-THIS IS BAD!”

“What’s gotten you so upset, dear?”

“Elza!”

Watson, one of the town guards, barreled into our guildhall looking distressed. City guards and adventurers never quite got along, but here in Ulmutt we cooperated. With the number of adventurers in the city, both adventurer and guard had to work to keep the peace. The Guildmaster did a great job of keeping us all together. If he took his post a little more seriously, he would even earn my respect.

Dias wasn’t in today. He’d probably gone out for a walk about the town. I would have to listen to what was bothering this poor guard.

“What happened?”

“Th-the prisoner has escaped!”

“Prisoner? Do you mean Solus?”

“Yes!”

Solus. The traitorous adventurer. After the Guildmaster was through with him, he gave us a lot of information. Solus didn’t act alone—he was taking orders from someone else. He hadn’t mentioned names yet, but we knew what this mastermind wanted.

Money was not their endgame. Instead, they were targeting parties in possession of powerful magic swords. Solus didn’t know what his boss wanted to do with them, but those were his orders.

He was also instructed to collect the venom sacs of the Mimic Venomcrawler and Pandemic Leech. The materials

were fragile and difficult to acquire—harvesting them incorrectly would ruin them. Moreover, the Pandemic Leech was an elusive creature only spotted a few times over the course of an entire year. It wasn't something you hunted on a casual trip to the dungeon, and adventurers would gather up every bit of information they could about the leech before seeking it.

The rare materials it yielded could easily net over two million Gold. The creature was a D-Threat, however, and its deadly venom and special abilities were too dangerous to risk getting hit. Even if you spotted the thing, most adventurers would rather sell this information than go after it. Even I would need to be fully prepared.

Solus was tasked with gathering as much information as he could. In the event his party took down a Pandemic Leech, he would kill the other members and steal the creature's materials for his own ends. He also targeted parties that had the special potions you needed to hunt them, and stole the potions instead. Sometimes, he would get his lackeys to do the dirty work for him.

Every part of the Pandemic Leech could be used to make illegal drugs. Trade of the materials was highly regulated by the Adventurer's Guild. The guild cards registered at the dungeon entrance logged everything a party killed—a Pandemic Leech would stick out like a sore thumb. You had to hand over your materials to the guard post at the entrance too. While there was always the possibility of not getting anything from a leech, saying so would put you under close scrutiny. Solus and his crew wouldn't want to pay that price.

So Solus killed the party he was infiltrating, took the venom sac, then passed it off to his cronies in the dungeon to smuggle out. As the sole survivor, Solus would then give

up the remaining leech parts to the guard post. The venom sac was the only thing his crew needed.

While most people would suspect foul play, Solus's Coercive Influence made sure it never happened. He got friendly with the guards, and they never asked him twice about his fallen comrades. The guards had their own schedules, too, so he never ran into the same guard twice. Knowing Solus, he probably took their schedule into account when going on his raids.

Good thing Fran had taken him off the streets. But now...

"How exactly did Solus escape? He's missing an arm and a leg. Literally. Did he have help?"

"We don't know how he did it, ma'am! The only thing for sure is that someone broke into the eastern prison and massacred everyone...!"

"Damn it! Any leads?"

"The entire guard is looking for the suspect as we speak!"

"All right! I'll ask the adventurers for help."

We'd have to put a delicious bounty on Solus to get everyone nice and motivated. Anyone who complained would get a spanking.

"Thank you, ma'am!"

"Have you sealed off the gates?"

"We've placed blockades on all of them!"

"Then I'll tell our adventurers to look in the city!"

"One more thing, sir. Do you know of a girl called Fran?"

"Frannie? What happened to her?"

“We were helping some dying adventurers in town and they said the one who attacked them was looking for an adventurer named Fran.”

“Did Solus attack them?”

“We can’t be sure... The victims didn’t know who it was. All we know is that whoever did it wasn’t missing any limbs.”

“Ugh! What is going on in this city!”

And where had the Guildmaster gone?!

I should check out the prison cells. I might find a clue there!

Chapter 4: At the End of a Tunnel

THE DAY AFTER my evolution talk with Fran, we had arrived at the bottom of the twentieth floor.

“This is the last part?”

Yeah. It'll be the boss room after this.

Which meant this was going to be the most difficult leg—Trap Forest. This section got its name from the innumerable amount of traps hidden inside.

Stay sharp.

“Can't wait.”

It's good that you're confident, but this section's going to be a lot tougher than everything that came before.

According to the archives, deactivating certain traps here could lead to the triggering of others...which could then lead to one big trap chain.

You can't look at these traps individually anymore. Take the whole room into consideration.

“Got it.”

Fran resumed her dungeon crawling. The entrance was loaded with traps, each of them complex in its own right. However, disarming them would spring deadly traps from the ceiling.

I thought those ceiling traps were our first priority, but that wasn't the right answer either. There were three traps on the floor too—we had to deal with two of them, and then disarm the one in the ceiling. Only then could we safely disarm the remaining floor trap. I only understood this

because we had spent the last few days doing nothing but disarming traps. I was getting a feel for how they worked. If this had been our first trap room, we would've triggered it for sure.

So this is the welcoming committee...

"Hm!"

The chain of contraptions made me nervous, but Fran looked like she couldn't wait.

Jet, be on the lookout for any monsters that might trigger these things.

"Arf!"

The obvious solution would be to blow the room up with area of effect spells to trip all the traps and any monsters that might be hiding.

"Hmm... Aah... I see..."

But I couldn't do that with Fran so engrossed in solving these things.

Two hours later.

"Done!"

Really? Great.

Fran beamed as she finished disarming her first trap chain.

"Hm!"

That sure took a lot of time, though.

"You think so?"

Yeah. We haven't made much progress over two hours...

We had made twenty meters past the entrance.

Fran noticed it too. She turned around and was quite shocked to see how little ground we'd made. She was expecting to go a lot faster.

"I...got too into it."

Pretty much. We might not clear this floor by the end of the day at this rate.

"Hm. I'll try harder."

Although she didn't give me the go-ahead to clear the room with spells.

Fran disarmed traps more quickly after that, but she tripped a lot more of them too. About one in five, at least. Sometimes we'd fall into a pit, other times we ran like hell from green gas, and we still had to dodge deadly spears coming out of the walls.

Fran was still unhurt though. Other adventurers would be dying at this point, but we had Poison Manipulation to nullify any poisonous gases, Dimension Magic to escape quickly, Danger Sense to detect dangerous events before they happened, and barrier skills we could immediately throw up in the event of Fran's failure.

"Whoops."

"Arf!"

Jet took the brunt of her mistakes. I lost count of the times I'd healed him. Still, he remained loyal and ever vigilant, standing beside Fran on the lookout for monsters. For this, he deserved many pats and cuddles after we were through.

"Ah."

"Aaarf!"

A few hours later, Fran's expertise in handling traps was close to that of a specialist. She took on even the most complex of traps without danger of tripping them. However, there was one small problem.

"Ugh..."

Fran groaned as she hunched over. Her eyes no longer shone with her initial excitement. She was a professional in disarming traps, but she also picked up the drudgery that went along with that. I would let her continue for as long as she wanted, but she clearly needed a break.

It reminded me of that time in my previous life where I played a racing game for twenty hours straight. By the time I was through, I never touched that game again.

"Teacher."

What's up?

"Let's...just blow them up with magic from now on."

Sure, that works.

"Hm."

That was probably the only way we could get through this area by the end of the day. If Fran was okay with it, then so was I.

All right, here it comes.

"Hm."

Fran and I backed off. Once we were at a safe distance, I started my carpet bomb. The shock was enough to set most of the traps off. They emitted some kind of gas, which exploded when they came in contact with our fire spells, further adding to the explosion. We cast about twenty spells between us, and eliminated about half of the traps. I think we got most of the ones triggered by vibration and heat.

We easily pinpointed the remaining ones and set them off from a safe distance with flame and earth spells. Most of what was left was triggered when you stepped on certain tiles. These covered a lot of ground too.

Right, let's keep going.

"Hm."

There were still traps ahead, but they weren't the sort that could be triggered by magic. They activated based on your remaining health.

Time to get serious.

"All right."

Fran used Air Hop and Dimension Jump to ignore them. We heard the traps go off behind us, but by then we were already far ahead. Our plan went so smoothly that I couldn't believe it took us half a day to make a hundred meters of progress. We ended up blasting through the remaining 200 meters in about ten minutes, but our extended stay on this floor had given our skills much needed training, so it wasn't a complete waste...

Even so, I had to say I was getting tired of it.

The dungeon boss room is at the end of this hallway.

"Finally."

After speeding through Trap Forest, a ten-meter-high door was the only thing that stood between us and the boss room. The steel door was etched with a demonic face which added to its intimidating aura.

There was some kind of magic barrier on it which made it difficult for me to see what was on the other side.

"Is the Dungeon Master inside?"

Probably. I don't have any information to go off of though.

"I see."

I read a lot about bosses in the archives, but nothing about what's beyond this door.

The East Dungeon was a special kind of dungeon that didn't have a single boss. Instead, the dungeon chose which bosses to spawn depending on the party. There were around fifteen bosses that any given party could end up fighting.

Weak parties were faced with E-Threats. Stronger parties were faced with C-Threats beyond the dungeon's official rank. The mages researching the dungeon figured out that it spawned different bosses based on how you performed. I'd memorized them all.

There were three kinds of C-Rank monsters.

The giant tiger, my old friend Tyrant Sabertooth.

The six-headed dragon of status ailments, Smog Hydra.

And the spirit-summoning Specter Lord.

Elza had fought the first two, while Amanda had faced the Specter Lord back when she was still a C-Rank. Battle records of other parties existed, but none of them had to deal with C-Ranks.

Strong adventurers fought strong bosses, while weak adventurers fought weak bosses. That was how it worked in this dungeon. As for Dias, he was allowed to come and go as he pleased, free of boss encounters.

What kind of boss would we be up against? Something weak would be easy, but we'd feel like we were being taken lightly. Too strong, however, and we wouldn't be able to beat it. The best spawn we could hope for was a D-Threat or something slightly stronger.

At least we had the option of fleeing if it turned out to be too difficult. This was one of the most unique things about the dungeon at Ulmutt: the boss door didn't lock

behind you. So long as you weren't instantly killed, you could escape with your life. This was part of the deal Dias had made.

We may have options, but a boss is a boss. Don't let your guard down.

"I won't."

I didn't need to warn her.

Let's get to it.

"Hm!"

"Woof!"

Fran pushed the door open, brimming with expectation. It was heavy, creaking open slowly despite her strength.

Creak—

With the door finally open, we saw the giant black thing waiting for us in the darkness.

"A ball?"

That's a ball.

"Woof?"

It was a ball all right. An elongated sphere, if you wanted to be pedantic.

How should I say this? The ball was segmented in a way that reminded me of the shell of a giant tortoise. It kind of looked like a big, black, round pineapple. The thing was ten meters in diameter and its uneven surface reminded me of a twenty-sided die.

Whatever it was, it was definitely strong. That much was clear from its aura.

Name: Disaster Pillbug

Race: Insect

Level: 45

HP: 1023; Magic: 521; Strength: 535; Agility: 412

Skills: Air Hop 5; Harden 8; Presence Sense 5; Regeneration 8; Impact Resistance 7; Oscillation 7; Mental Status Resistance 8; Abnormal Status Resistance 8; Rush 9; Heat Sense 3; Magic Resistance 7; Mana Sense 5; Mana Thruster 7; Enhanced Carapace; Light Carapace; Hardened Carapace; Enhanced Regeneration; Increase Weight

Lore: A mutated pillbug covered entirely by its own carapace. Lacking the power of flight, it uses its spherical body to charge toward prey, and is strong enough to break boulders. Mana Thruster gives the pillbug the ability to change the course of its tackle midway. Its tough carapace is very difficult to pierce. Although a C-Threat, its abilities place it closer to a B-Threat.

Crystal Location: Center/Heart.

A strong C-Threat. Just our luck.

Could we even damage this thing? It had a lot of resistance skills, on top of Harden and Regeneration. At least it couldn't use magic...but that didn't count for much when you took its gigantic size into consideration.

No use standing here and staring at it!

Fran, Jet, we're going in!

He who dares, wins!

The three of us launched our spells at the black sphere lurking in the middle of the room.

Inferno Burst!

“Tornado Lance!”

“Groar!”

But the pillbug dodged all our attacks easily. It bolted with blinding speed. The way the thing moved was unsettling. It accelerated from a dead stop without warning. I could only guess that was how it used Mana Thruster.

I had to get rid of my assumption that big and heavy equaled slow.

“Here it comes.”

Dodge!

Evading our spells, the pillbug curved around the room to charge in our direction. For a moment, I understood the feelings of a certain Mr. Jones the Temple Raider. The rumbling reverberated through my blade.

Fran kicked the floor away in an effort to dodge, but the pillbug made a sharp turn and kept up its chase. I didn’t think its Mana Thruster would give it such terrifying cornering abilities!

We used flame magic to increase our airtime, but the pillbug managed to graze Fran and sent her flying across the room.

“Urgh!”

Fran, are you all right?!

“Hm... Just a scratch.”

Yeah, but that one scratch hit you really hard!

The pillbug’s speed made it a force to be reckoned with, but Oscillation made it downright deadly. The slightest touch was enough to send powerful vibrations through its victim’s body.

Melee combat was too dangerous. The problem was that the thing had Magic Resistance too. We wouldn’t be

able to do enough damage with our spells.

This thing won't let up!

"But it's our first tough fight in a while."

So?

"It's a chance for me to get stronger."

This is the problem with you blood knights! You enjoy this way too much!

Fran grinned as the pillbug made another pass.

"Haa!"

She dodged at the last second to prevent the creature from using Mana Thruster. It was still too close for comfort, but even so, such obvious tricks didn't work on the pillbug.

It fired up its Mana Thrusters and nudged itself against her. Mana Thruster seemed to be its primary skill for attack—we needed to keep an eye open for it.

"Urgh!"

The pillbug tackled Fran with all the force its mass and acceleration provided. Our barriers were instantly broken, and Fran was sent flying once more.

While she didn't show any signs of outward injury, her insides were vibrating from the creature's Oscillation. Fran struggled to get on her feet, and the pillbug came rolling at her.

Damn it!

"Thanks, Teacher."

She would've been flattened if I didn't blink her out of there.

The pillbug wasn't done with its barrage. It bounced off the wall and used the momentum to come at us. It might be a bug, but it sure was smart.

“In that case...!”

Fran decided that if she couldn't dodge left and right, she would dodge up.

She made a great leap toward the ceiling.

The pillbug wasn't aerodynamic enough to chase her there, even if it had used Mana Thruster. Or so I thought—

“Skreee!”

“!”

It saw through our plan and accelerated off the ground to give chase. To make matters worse, the creature's speed was perfectly maintained. This wasn't Mana Thruster—it was Air Hop.

Gaaah!

I used Barrier and Telekinesis to deflect the pillbug's charge. Fran still took the brunt of Oscillation though, and hurtled right toward the ceiling.

“Ack!”

Blood trickled out of her mouth as she fell. The pillbug's attacks had damaged her insides.

Fran, we're getting out of here!

“Hm...”

I jumped us away from the pillbug to heal her. That slight nudge took away half her health...

We can't rely on close combat here. Hit it with some spells when you see an opening. The thing might have Magic Resistance, but at least we'll be doing some damage. We'll need a spell that can overcome its defenses.

“Got it.”

I'll keep him busy with my spells so you can strike. That's our best strategy.

“Hm.”

Here goes! Inferno Burst!

The two flaming beams surrounded the creature’s carapace. When they faded, Fran could move in to deal even more damage. Even if it managed to run away, the flames made sure that it didn’t escape unscathed.

“Skreee!”

Oh right, it could jump.

The pillbug leaped into the air, and with grace you wouldn’t expect from its stature, bounded over the flames. But we had seen this move before. There was no reason to panic.

You can’t Mana Thruster twice in a row!

Air Hop wasn’t a skill that lent itself to such graceful agility. The thing had used Mana Thruster for sure, and there was no way it could use it over and over like this. Which meant that it couldn’t dodge any incoming attacks right now!

Fran! Jet!

“Hm!”

“Awoooo!”

We launched our spells at the same moment.

“Skreee!”

The pillbug let out an ear-splitting shriek as it was blown about ten meters up into the air. Part of its carapace was singed as red and black smoke rose from the wound. It was the first significant amount of damage we’d dealt.

Fran didn’t let the chance go to waste. She dashed forward, striking the black ball that lay still on the floor.

“Taaah!”

She prepared a Sword Art and targeted the red hot part of the shell.

Clang!

The shell was still hard, despite looking molten. My blade made a high-pitched ring as it bounced against the carapace. The beast's Oscillation and my Vibrofang clashed and reverberated into Fran, but the pillbug's Oscillation was far stronger than mine. I thought I could cancel out its effects with my Vibrofang, but it had completely overwhelmed me. After all that, we only managed to scratch the surface.

Damn it. It's already regenerating.

"Hm..."

Chipping away at the pillbug wouldn't work. This thing was as tough as Linford. It was also smart enough to use sense skills and Oscillation to counter our attacks.

Without a concentrated effort, killing it was impossible. If we split our focus to attack and evade, it would graze us to death.

So we can't chip this thing to death...

"That shell is hard."

Fran, you're going to have to experiment with Elemental Blade. Maybe it's weak to one of the elements. I'll help.

"I'll try."

We'll have to be patient, hang in there.

"Hm! We're gonna win."

Let's go!

Dodging its various charges, we experimented with ways to penetrate the pillbug's steel carapace. Damage wasn't our primary concern here, we were waiting to see if

any of our attacks actually affected the creature in some way.

Fran got hurt in the process, but it was a worthy trade. She made big mistakes, which turned to small mistakes, until eventually she got the hang of it. I always healed her wounds, and Fran always got back up with the same fierce determination.

I think we're close to winning.

"We'll get it for sure with our next cut."

All right! Time to show this bug bastard what we're made of!

"Hm!"

Take this!

I used Burst Flame, an area of effect fire spell which engulfed the arena in fire. I amplified the cast with mana, and it was much stronger than normal. The aim was to take away its senses. Flames took away its sight. Explosions took away its hearing. The extreme heat dulled its sense of touch. The overcharged spell disrupted its Mana Sense.

We were completely hidden in the flames.

Then Jet jumped at the pillbug.

"Grrr!"

While he couldn't damage the creature, it would divert its attention.

"Roaaar!"

The pillbug changed course and rolled toward the sting of Jet's dark magic. Jet was in full direwolf form, but even he looked tiny next to the Disaster Pillbug. Still, he was more agile than Fran, and he had the benefit of Shadow Walk.

He fired off a few more dark spells to draw the pillbug's attention. I didn't know whether the bug could feel anger,

but it was certainly barreling toward Jet in a rolling ball of rage.

With Jet buying us time, we were able to prepare for our next attack. Thanks to the long hours we'd spent in this dungeon, I'd gotten used to Transmogrifying. I was especially used to the katana form, which took me no time and very little trouble to maintain.

Fran moved me to her hip and pressurized my sheath. Pressurized Quickdraw was a powerful skill she'd improvised when facing Linford. She had perfected it during countless uses over the course of this dungeon run. It really was a one hit kill.

She wouldn't be able to recreate the power she unleashed during our fight with Linford, of course. We lacked the vertical space and the momentum of a great fall, and we couldn't put all our mana into this blow either. We had to stay on our toes. But we were good to go. I was getting tired of running.

Jet! Bring it over here!

"Woof!"

Jet barked and led the pillbug to us. The creature was so intent on running him over that it crashed into the wall. This was the opening we'd been waiting for.

Even the pillbug would have trouble fighting its own inertia. It recoiled off the wall and was about to reposition itself with Air Hop when it saw Jet run above it. The bug wasted its Air Hop to give chase—now it wouldn't be able to use it again for a while.

Fran stood by with her Pressurized Quickdraw. She used fire and wind magic to build the pressure. It felt like the tightening of a violin string. I added Increase Weight, Vibrofang, and Elemental Blade to make her blow even more

devastating. Pressure launched me out of the sheath at such blinding speed that I felt my blade creak.

“Haaaa!”

Gotcha!

This blow was going to cut right through the pillbug’s carapace. It didn’t matter how hard it was, we had already won. At least, it felt that way. But I had underestimated our opponent. The bug wasn’t a C-Rank just because of its attack power.

“Screeech!”

The bug used Mana Thruster to spin in the same direction as the cut, dissipating most of the force. While there was a deep cut in its shell, it still wasn’t enough to reach the flesh.

Damn it! That didn’t work either?!

“It’s strong.”

I could say the same about you.

“Hm?”

Fran smiled, despite just having her strongest attack deflected.

But we got what we wanted out of that attack.

I had a backup plan just in case Pressurized Quickdraw didn’t kill it. It would’ve been so much better if it did though!

Just as I thought.

“Hm. It can’t regenerate if it’s frozen.”

We observed the open wound we’d created. Fran imbued me with the frost element for our next attack. We had tried all the other elements in our search for the

creature's weakness, so I felt kind of silly for not using frost sooner.

The wound wasn't closing. The frost from my elemental blade prevented it from regenerating. Strike the same spot with the same amount of force, and we would be sure to bust through.

"One more!"

Yeah! Let's finish this!

"Woof!"

The counter rotation decreased the impact of our blow. Targeting that specific spot would be difficult when the thing was rolling around at the speed of sound.

Let it use Mana Thruster, then strike. It shouldn't be able to use that skill to move its giant body twice in a row.

"Hm. Jet, you'll have to bait it again."

"Bark!"

We regrouped, determined to take the thing down. Our plan of attack was the same: Jet would distract it while we waited for a golden opening. The chance soon presented itself. The pillbug chased Jet and crashed into a wall. Again, it used Mana Thruster on the rebound to change direction.

We wasted no time. The wound we opened earlier was gaping right at us. Without Mana Thruster, the creature was crippled. This was the perfect chance.

Hit that spot just right and we win.

"Hm!"

Let's go!

"Haaaa!"

Again, Fran accelerated.

We have you now!

But, with victory so close at hand, I got careless. I had underestimated the creature's latent power. We were going to win. We were so close. So I thought. So the bug led me to believe. But the pillbug had another trick up its shell.

Boomf!

Right before Fran's blade could connect, the pillbug blasted something out of the open wound. Its Mana Thruster shattered bits of its own shell like a shotgun. The pillbug waited until we were rubbing against it to prevent us from dodging. It was pushing its limits, and I sensed that it had consumed a large amount of mana.

"Aaaargh!"

Damn it!

Compressed mana took the form of a white beam of light and blinded us. I hadn't expected Mana Thruster to be on such a short cooldown. The pillbug had shown no indication of it. This must be his ace in the hole.

Even under the effects of Dimension Magic, the carapace buckshot was still fast enough to be dangerous. How fast were these things? A direct hit from a single piece might prove fatal.

I didn't have time to put up a fully-charged barrier, and the flak ripped right through. I redirected mana to keep the flak from hurting Fran, but the force of the shards was too strong. I couldn't cover her entire body with just Telekinesis.

Fran had already committed to her attack. She had no time to dodge.

"Aaah!"

Short Ju—

Fran cried in pain, and in my panic I started casting Dimension Jump.

No! We have to keep going!

But Fran stopped me mid-cast. She exposed the left side of her body, protecting her right hand. Then, she folded her left arm as if to cover her face and heart. She called off a few skills and put up a barrier. Finally, she braced herself so the creature's shotgun blast wouldn't blow her away.

The supersonic flak rained down on her, regardless of our barrier and Telekinesis. It still had enough force to pierce through flesh. Fran's body was dotted with countless tiny holes. The scraps dug into her flesh. The pain must have been excruciating.

"Ungh..."

But Fran only groaned. She gritted her teeth so hard that I could hear them grinding. Her body was bloodied and she screamed at the top of her lungs as if to release the pain.

"Vernier!"

Accelerated by the flame spell, Fran charged and thrust me forward. With the carapace no longer in the way, her attack connected. I felt myself sink into soft flesh, a far cry from the denial of the metallic carapace.

"Skreeeee!"

The pillbug's anguish filled the room.

"Huff... Urk..."

Fran wavered as she buried me halfway through its body.

Just a little more, Fran!

"Just...die!"

Come on!

We had to end this before Fran died!

I focused all my mana on Elemental Blade Wind and Vibrofang. Then, I unleashed the full potential of Transmogrify. I took on the shape of the P.A.: sleek, sharp steel that pierced and absorbed the crystal of the skeletons surrounding us.

I imagined sharp hairs growing out of my blade. Hundreds of spikes exploded inside the bug's body. I manipulated these steel threads, running through the pillbug's flesh, veins, and organs. My movement wasn't as precise as the P.A.'s though. I couldn't exactly churn the pillbug's insides into mush, but I got deep enough to do a lot of damage.

Now!

"Hm!"

Fran used the last of her strength to imbue my blade with lightning.

"Skreee...eeee!"

Her Elemental Blade dealt the final blow. The pillbug struggled in its death throes, then settled into silence.

***You have achieved another level in Evolution.
Acquired 60 EP.***

P.A. it's been a while! Wait, I have to take care of Fran!

I quickly laid her down on the floor.

Greater Heal! Greater Heal!

"Aaah...!"

Her lacerations started healing as her flesh regenerated and pushed the flak out from underneath. Fran groaned in pain, the rapid healing hurting as much as the shotgun blast.

Fran! Are you all right?

“Teacher...”

She looked as good as new.

Try wiggling your fingers and toes.

“Hm? Yeah, they’re fine.”

Okay. Good.

No broken nerves, either.

“Did...we win?”

Damn right we did.

Fran clenched her fists in approval, still laying on the ground. She smiled.

“It’s been so long since we won.”

What do you mean?

“I mean fighting a foe head-on and winning by ourselves.”

I reflected on our previous battles. The first Demon we fought was held back by its Dungeon Master, and pretty much killed itself as a result. Amanda danced circles around us in our playfight. The Lich nearly killed us, and we would’ve been dead if it weren’t for P.A. The Midgardsormr was near invincible, and Fran didn’t even get near enough to fight it. Valuza was unfortunately squashed when I lost control of myself, robbing Fran of the satisfaction of victory. Linford would’ve destroyed the entire city of Bulbola if Amanda hadn’t intervened. The only city-destroying monster we’d ever faced and defeated was the Legendary Skeleton of the floating island.

Fran has reached Level 45.

"Hm!"

About time!

Name: Fran

Age: 12

Race: Black Cat

Class: Blade Mage

Status: Contract (Swordmaster)

Level: 45/45

HP: 551; Magic: 432; Strength: 286; Agility: 275

Skills: Stealth 4; Wind Magic 2; Royal Etiquette 4; Presence Sense 5; Sword Arts 7; Sword Mastery 7; Malice Resistance 1; Blink 6; Fire Magic 4; Cooking 2; Undead Killer; Fiend Killer; Insect Killer; Spirit Manipulation; Goblin Killer; Cold Mind; Demon Killer; Expert Carver; Mana Manipulation; Night Vision.

Class Skill: Focus Mana

Special Skill: Black Cat's Blessing

Titles: Undead Killer; Veteran; Fiend Killer; Insect Killer; Disassembly Expert; Healing Mage; Goblin Killer; Butcher; Skill Collector; Skill Maniac; Dungeon Conqueror; Super Glutton; Demon Killer; Fire Mage; Wind Mage; Master Chef.

Equipment: Black Cat Set (Black Cat Armor, Black Cat Gloves, Black Cat Boots, Black Cat Earring, Black Cat Cloak, Black Cat Belt); Bracelet of Strength +1; Bracelet of Sacrifice

Fran had finally hit the peak.

"Woof..."

Jet and I looked at her in tense silence.

What would happen now?

“...”

Fran opened and closed the palm of her hand to make sure she wasn't missing any signs...

Nothing?

“Hm.”

“Ruff...”

Nothing changed. Fran had yet to evolve. It was expected, but it still dampened our spirits.

Don't worry about it too much, Fran.

“Yeah. I knew this was coming.”

Really?

“Hm. Never mind me. You ranked up, Teacher?”

Oh, right. I didn't notice because of the fight. Let's see...

I checked my own stats.

Name: Teacher

User: Fran

Race: Intelligent Weapon

Attack: 622; MP: 4150/4150; Durability: 3950/3950

Mana Conductivity: A+

Evolution: [Rank 12; Crystals: 6689/7800; Skill Capacity: 112; EP: 62]

Skills: Identify 10; Identity Protection; Transmogrify; High Speed Self Repair; Telekinesis;

***Telekinesis Up (low); Telepathy; Attack Up (low);
Dimension Magic; Skill Sharing; User Status Up
(medium); User Recovery Rate Up (low);
Heavensight; Seal Immunity; MP Up (low); Bestiary;
Mage; Skill Capacity Up (medium)***

***Unique Skill: Essence of Falsehood 5; Pocket
Dimension 1***

***Superior Skill: Skill Taker SP; Complex
Doppelganger SP***

I just got 62 EP. I can get even stronger now.

What made me happiest was the fact that I had broken 600 Attack. Not a lot of swords went that high. I was now entering the realm of superior swords, even without my skills. Looking at Garrus's swords wouldn't dent my self-esteem now!

"Congratulations, Teacher."

Thanks. Now we just need to get you to evolve!

To start, we would need some leads on her evolution requirements. I didn't know whether Aurel would know anything, but he must have something for us.

We'll need to see the Dungeon Master before we can interrogate Aurel.

"Hm!"

Fran nodded enthusiastically.

Jet nudged against her leg, as if he wanted to tell her something.

"Woof!"

You leveled up, too, did you, Jet? Let's see.

Name: Jet (Darkness Wolf)

Race: Direwolf

Level: 30/50

HP: 754; Magic: 865; Strength: 401; Agility: 507

Skills: Shadow Resistance 8; Shadow Magic 4; Heightened Senses 10; Stealth 7; Fang Arts 6; Fang Mastery 6; Shadow Lurk 10; Shadow Walk 6; Air Hop 8; Fear 4; Vigilance 7; Conceal Presence 6; Regeneration 5; Deadly Venom Magic 2; Malice Sense 1; Malice Resistance 1; Blink 5; Hush 6; Necromancy 5; Life Sense 8; Mental Resistance 6; Claw Mastery 1; Poison Magic 10; Echolocation 8; Roar 8; Nightshade 10; Nightvision; Toxic Fang;

Health Regeneration; Mana Regeneration; Shapeshift; Mana Manipulation.

Unique Skill: Predator

Titles: Sword Clan; Great Wolf Clan

Equipment: Captive Claws

“You’ve gotten strong, Jet.”

And you got a new skill too. Claw Mastery?

Jet was used to swiping at his enemies with his paws, but today was the first time he’d equipped a claw weapon. He picked up a rock with his mouth, and tossed it into the air. Then, he turned away and performed a somersault toward it.

“Arf!”

The Captive Claws extended and sliced the rock clean into four parts. It was pretty fast too. Together with Paralyze, this thing would come in pretty handy.

“That was cool.”

“Woof!”

Jet barked happily. With his increased stats and variety of skills, Jet was now as strong as a C-Threat. Although his stats might not be as strong, his skills more than made up for it. The only things he lacked were battle experience and composure. I guess he could afford to be a bit more feral, too...

I was aware that I tended to spoil him... We could communicate perfectly with each other, which eliminated the need for discipline. Jet liked to be spoiled, and I'd always wanted a dog to dote on. I couldn't help myself.

Fran patted his head and Jet closed his eyes and wagged his tail vigorously. He was probably one step away from exposing his belly... I really needed to step up the discipline.

“What now, Teacher?”

Right, I almost forgot.

No use standing around here. We had killed the boss, but our real appointment was with the Dungeon Master. I collected the Disaster Pillbug's remains and looked around the room. No new paths or doors had emerged, but we waited a while longer. Soon a pillar of light shone into the center of the room.

“Teacher.”

I see it.

The light was our ticket home. Stepping into it would transport us to the entrance. It was an indulgence for adventurers who'd spent all their resources in the boss fight. That said, we still had business here.

Let's look around the room a little more. Do not touch that pillar of light.

“Hm.”

“Woof.”

Ten minutes later.

We had gone over the boss room with a fine-toothed comb, but failed to discover any hidden paths. I spotted an odd space on the other side of one of the walls, but couldn't figure out how to get to it. Were we supposed to bust through with brute force?

I decided against it, since it seemed like the space was off-limits and not something that a Dungeon Master opened upon completion of certain tasks. If we upset them now, we could forget about completing the quest. Instead, Fran's life might be in danger.

What to do...

“Hmmm.”

Hang on. If we couldn't get to the Dungeon Master, maybe we could get her to come to us.

Fran, take out the pendant Aurel gave you.

“This one?”

Fran rummaged in her Pocket Dimension.

Now try calling for the Dungeon Master.

“All right. Special delivery for one Ms. Dungeon Master.”

She held the pendant over her head. There was a high likelihood that the Dungeon Master was watching us. This might be the best way to lure her out. If it failed, we would try something else.

“Special delivery—”

“Arf, arf!”

We repeated the appeal a few times.

Who sent you: Aurel or Dias?

Suddenly, the voice of a young woman echoed through the room. Was this the Dungeon Master?

"Hm. Aurel."

I see... Very well. Wait a moment.

A path opened in one of the walls, just big enough for Fran to go through. It was connected to the strange space we found earlier.

Come in.

There weren't any traps in the passageway, but the room at the end could be filled with monsters, traps, or worse. We followed carefully—my telekinesis and teleportation spells at the ready. To our relief, the path was long, but there were no monsters there.

We saw a dim light at the end of the tunnel. Upon reaching our destination, we found a room befitting a noble's mansion, with many treasures strewn about. In the midst of it all stood a woman.

Her body was wrapped in a white dress which looked light as a feather. Her long, black hair flowed all the way to her knees. She looked about thirty, armed with a balanced body and bewitching face. The way she stood exuded the aura of a warrior—she was as powerful as she was beautiful. And she was powerful indeed. Definitely stronger than us. Maybe as strong as Amanda.

Since she didn't seem hostile, we relaxed. Good thing, too, since I would've gone into battle mode if she hinted at any funny business. Dungeons could make people tense like that.

I couldn't help identifying her, but she had Identity Protection on. All I could see was part of her skill sheet and her name: Dungeon Master.

Still, two things caught my eye: the ears coming out of her head and the tail which swayed behind her. I'd seen them a million times before. They looked exactly like Fran's.

A Black Cat...?

"You've done well in getting this far, Black Cat," said the woman.

"Hm!"

Fran dropped to her left knee, and touched her left fist to the ground. She put her right hand behind her waist.

"Thank you for granting me this audience. I am Black Cat Fran."

I had never seen Fran kneel before. Royal Etiquette was pulling its weight. This must be how beastmen of the same race greeted each other when there was a clear difference in status. I'd never expected Fran to pay such respect to anyone.

"I am Lumina. A Black Cat warrior and the Dungeon Master of Ulmutt."

So she *was* a Black Cat. But why would Fran go to such lengths to humble herself?

"Lady Lumina the Black Tiger?"

"Hahaha! Indeed. I am Black Tiger Lumina of the Black Cats."

Now I understood why Fran paid so much respect to her. Lumina was her goal.

"You've done well, child. I welcome you."



An evolved Black Cat was standing before her. Fran didn't even need to go back to Aurel, she could just ask Lumina herself.

I'm amazed you could tell, though.

Tell what?

That she's an evolved Black Cat. There haven't been any before, right?

We're the same race. I knew the second I saw her.

"Be seated," Lumina said.

"Yes, ma'am."

The Dungeon Master pointed Fran to a chair. She was intimidating, but she didn't seem like a bad person. Fran got off her knees and sat down. This was the first time I had seen her so well-behaved. Then again, anyone would be if they met a legendary hero. Fran's eyes glowed with adoration, her ears and tail flopping about restlessly.

"As for the wolf...you may be at ease wherever you please."

"Woof."

Jet did as he was told and found a carpet to lie on. While he hadn't warmed up to Lumina yet, he knew she was the alpha here. So long as she didn't threaten us, he would do as she said.

"You said Aurel sent you?"

"Yes. Here."

"Aaah... I see."

Lumina took the pendant and turned it over in her hand. She nodded.

"It looks like the genuine article."

She touched the center of the pendant in a way which caused it to open. Inside was a small piece of paper. This was the thing we were supposed to deliver.

Lumina unfolded the letter to read it.

“Hmm... What?!”

“Hm!”

“Grr!”

Lumina let out a burst of murderous energy. Fran jumped out of her chair and Jet roared as he returned to his former size.

“Ah, apologies. I just read something which reminded me of an unpleasant experience.”

A cool smile returned to Lumina’s face. Her murderous aura receded again. That scared the crap out of me. Fran wiped a bead of cold sweat from her chin and returned to her seat.

“Tell young Aurel that I understand,” Lumina said, returning the pendant to Fran. “I have no further need of this. Please return it to him, with my salutations.”

The pendant really was nothing special.

“All right.”

Young Aurel? Really? The White Wolf was pushing seventy.

“You seem very young, Lady Lumina. But how old are you?”

“Hahaha! To think you would ask me my age. Very bold of you! This is a first in all my days as a Dungeon Master.”

Lumina laughed without a trace of anger. She treated Fran like a loving grandmother treated her grandchild. As a Black Cat, she must know what Fran was going through.

Fran had skipped the pleasantries with Inina, despite the fact she was older. But she went to the trouble of addressing Lumina as “Lady.”

“I’ve lost count of my days as a Dungeon Master, but I suppose it’s been over 500 years.”

Dungeon Masters didn’t age. So long as the dungeon core remained intact, Lumina was virtually immortal.

“With a little bit of mana, I can change how I look. This is what I looked like when I became a Dungeon Master.”

Lumina smiled. She had been around a long time, long enough to evolve. She might be the only Black Cat in existence to have done it.

“Lady Lumina.”

“Yes?”

Knowing that she had something important on her mind, Lumina gave Fran her undivided attention.

“Black Cats... Can we evolve?”

Fran cut right to the chase. This was the only question that mattered. She wanted to find out while Lumina was standing right in front of her.

“...”

Fran held her breath, motionless as a statue. She looked Lumina right in the eyes and clenched her fists on the table.

“...”

“Yes. Of course.”

“I see.”

Fran sighed, remembering to breathe again. Her words were charged with a multitude of emotions, and not just joy. She remembered all the hardship and suffering she’d been

through. She was hopeful, and reassured that she hadn't chosen the wrong path. All these thoughts and feelings were encapsulated into those two simple words.

"I want to evolve."

"Indeed."

"Please, if you know the way, tell me."

Fran bowed deeply. She pressed her hands and face into the table. If she were on the floor, she would've prostrated herself.

I was completely absorbed.

"I know the way...and I wish I could tell you."

"In that case...!"

Fran raised her face. Her cheeks were flushed and her mouth half-agape with excitement, but what Lumina said next was not what Fran wanted to hear.

"But I cannot."

"Why...?"

Her reply puzzled Fran.

"I'm sorry."

But Lumina only offered a grim apology.

"..."

Fran dropped to her chair like a puppet with cut strings. She would have fainted if the chair hadn't caught her. Despair filled her eyes. Her validation was standing right in front of her, but would not even give her a clue. Lumina looked at Fran's dark expression, her eyes glowing with sympathy.

"I'm sorry. But as long as I am a Dungeon Master, I am not free to tell you."

"What...do you mean?"

“Dungeon Masters are blessed by the Goddess of Chaos. We are given the ability to manipulate dungeons as well as immortality, but we are also cursed.”

According to Lumina, there were many things that Dungeon Masters weren't allowed to talk about, chief among them being how dungeons worked. They were even restricted in writing about it. But why wouldn't she be allowed to discuss evolution? That seemed to have nothing to do with the dungeons...

“Does the Goddess of Chaos have something to do with our evolution?”

“Yes. A heavy yoke was set on our evolution 500 years ago.”

While Black Cat evolution had nothing to do with dungeons, it was related to their ruler.

“I am the last Black Tiger.”

“One question then.”

“Of course. I will answer to my best ability, if I may,” Lumina replied, scoffing at herself.

She was as disappointed as Fran.

“Can Black Cats still evolve?”

“Yes. Difficult, but yes.”

Fran was visibly relieved. She could be hopeful as long as her goal wasn't impossible.

“I see. Why did the goddess do that?”

“I can't say... I'm sorry. You must discover that on your own.”

“Then how can I find out?”

“Oh...! Forgive me, child! I cannot say!”

Lumina gritted her teeth and bowed her head in apology. They stood there in silence for a while, until Lumina opened her mouth.

“Suppose... Let’s suppose...”

“Hm?”

“Let’s suppose that killing me would yield the secret. Would you?”

Lumina gave Fran a ludicrous offer.

“Kill you, Lady Lumina?”

“Nothing more than a hypothetical, really.”

Lumina smiled. She’d clearly wanted to confuse Fran.

“Then I won’t.”

But Fran answered without a second thought. To her, saying she would kill Lumina was a joke.

“But then you could evolve.”

“I’m good, thanks. I’ll find another way.”

Fran shook her head. She carried the dream of her tribe on her shoulders. Still, she wouldn’t go so far as to kill her predecessor for it. Also, Dias had specifically warned us not to kill the Dungeon Master—not that we could do it even if we wanted to. But if we did, we would be branded as traitors, and I didn’t want Fran to live the rest of her life as a fugitive.

“I see... Hah. Of course. You two really are alike.”

“Hm?”

“No, it’s nothing. I’m sorry for asking such strange questions. But I’m afraid this is all I can tell you...”

What was this about? Would killing Lumina really allow Fran to evolve? It couldn’t. If it did, then Lumina would have been prohibited from even uttering the question. Did she ask from desperation? Or did it contain some kind of clue?

Was killing a fellow Black Cat the requirement? Or killing a Dungeon Master? Certainly not the latter, because we killed a goblin Dungeon Master in the past and nothing happened.

I couldn't make heads or tails of it.

"Come, drink your tea."

"Hm..."

Lumina poured Fran a cup of tea, as if in consolation. She told her about the Black Cat tribe of yore, back when she was young. The conversation was permitted as long as she made no attempt to tell Fran about evolution.

Five hundred years ago, before Lumina became a Dungeon Master, Black Cats evolved as easily as the other beast tribes. They lived in harmony with the rest of the tribes too.

"They didn't mock us?"

"Indeed. In fact, our military strength used to be so great that they would come to us for assistance."

"Really?"

"Indeed. Our royalty was mighty, and gained the fear and admiration of the elders of the other tribes."

Royalty? I thought beastmen tribes only had elders. Were these Black Cats one step above?

"Black Cat royalty?"

"Indeed... Although that is all I can say."

"Aww."

I couldn't make out the limits of Lumina's discussion. As the conversation carried on, I deduced that she couldn't mention anything regarding Black Cat evolution, or why the goddess imposed such harsh limitations on them. She also

couldn't talk about the tribe's royalty, so maybe they had something to do with it.

Black Cats only stopped evolving 500 years ago, so how was it that no one remembered their history? Elves lived for hundreds of years, and people told stories dating back to when the world was created. How could they have forgotten? Did the Goddess of Chaos have something to do with that too? I'd have to ask an elf the next time I saw one.

The two carried on their conversation as sisters of the tribe. We couldn't figure out the conditions for evolution, but Fran and Lumina were both smiling.

"Now...I have one favor to ask of you," said Lumina. "If you are willing."

"Sure. Go for it."

"Hahaha. Nothing too difficult. I need you to deliver a message to Dias."

"Dias? Not Aurel?"

"Yes, Dias. Tell him that he needs to uphold his end of the bargain. Can you do that?"

"Of course."

"Now then, is there anything else you wish to ask of me? Anything at all, as long as I am able."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

Fran thought about it. She went through every request in her head and found them wanting.

Teacher?

I'll leave this one to you, Fran. Just ask for the first thing that comes to your mind.

"All right."

“Have you made your choice?” Lumina asked.

“Hm.” Fran nodded and made her request with a quiet fire burning in her eyes. “Fight me.”

“And so you will.”

“Show me the power of a Black Tiger.”

It was just like Fran to ask a powerful opponent to spar with her. She wanted to feel Lumina’s power for herself—that power was her goal. Lumina answered with a genuine laugh.

“Very well! I shall give you a taste of my strength. Hold on while I make the appropriate preparations.”

“Hm.”

“Here. This will keep you company while I’m away. Feel free to ask anything of it.”

Lumina produced a mannequin that was dressed like a butler. It looked like one of those wooden models you used to paint. The mannequin’s movements were fluid as it refilled Fran’s cup of tea.

“Thanks.”

The mannequin nodded. It walked to a shelf in a corner of the room and plated up some cookies and chocolates. It served them to Fran, and motioned her to eat. The mannequin wasn’t able to talk, but it was definitely Lumina’s familiar.

“Hm. It’s good.”

Fran enjoyed her tea and sweets for a good ten minutes.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. It’s all ready now.”

“Hm?”

Lumina returned. She didn’t look any different. Fran tilted her head. Lumina was still wearing her white dress

with its numerous decorations. She hadn't even put on an extra piece of armor. The only difference was the sword hanging from her waist. I didn't feel any magic from it either. It definitely wasn't enchanted.

"Come."

Lumina walked away. We hurried to catch up, and she led us to a dome, a hundred meters in diameter.

"Forgive me. I don't have a dedicated sparring room, so I had to make this. I hope it suits your tastes."

She wasn't preparing herself while she was away, Lumina was making an entire room for us to fight in. She was a real Dungeon Master.

You just watch, Teacher.

I know. This one's all you, Fran.

I wasn't about to do anything funny while Fran had her most important fight.

"Shall we?"

"Are you ready?" Fran asked, eyeing Lumina's thin dress.

Sensing her worry, Lumina smiled.

"Ah, so you think you can land a hit on me?"

"Of course."

"Hahaha, that's the spirit! Not to worry. These clothes are reinforced with mana. I would say they're tougher than full plate armor. I'm also wearing a Bracelet of Sacrifice, so come at me with all you've got."

"All right."

Fran nodded enthusiastically, and Lumina answered with a battle-hungry smile. They were so very much alike.

"We shall begin."

“Hm!”

The fight commenced. Lumina was a swordsman. A mighty fine one, too, if her clashes with Fran were any indication. I only saw her sense skills earlier, since she had Identity Protection. But she had Mana Manipulation so she could probably use magic as well.

The match started quietly enough as the two gauged each other's abilities, but the intensity picked up soon enough.

“Very good! And at such a young age!”

“Hm!”

“Come on!”

“Haa!”

“What's the matter? You could've clinched it had you taken an extra step!”

Lumina was stronger. Fran was coming at her with all she had, but Lumina still had time to critique Fran's form of attack.

“Come at me, Fran! Surely you can do more!”

“Hm. Fire Javelin!”

Fran initiated the first spell of the fight. She launched a flaming spear at Lumina, immediately followed by a slash. Lumina saw right through her, and dodged both the spear and the sword.

“Too easy! You can't expect to hit me with such predictable feints!”

“Hm!”

This signaled the beginning of the magic. Lumina was a user of wind and fire magic.

“This is how you use Fire Magic! Fire Arrow!”

“Huh?”

“Don’t let my spells distract you!”

She was good at it too. The arrows launched from behind her, concealing their direction. Meanwhile, Lumina manipulated Fran’s cloak with wind magic to slow her down, leaving her open to attack. Lumina’s mana control was a thing to behold. We could launch more fire arrows with a single cast, but she could actually direct them along different trajectories. Even I couldn’t do that, certainly not in the heat of battle.

The match carried on for thirty minutes. Fran was getting winded. Lumina looked ecstatic.

“Huff... Huff...”

“You are very strong for one who has yet to evolve... If you could achieve evolution, your name might go down in history.” Lumina grinned, but the smile immediately faded from her lips. “It is time to end this. I will show you a glimpse of the power you seek. Try not to die.”

“Bring it on.”

Fran readied me, fear and expectation mixed together in her eyes. Lumina saw her stance, and returned her sword to her waist.

“Lumina?”

“I can’t risk killing you here,” Lumina replied in a grave tone. “Prepare yourself.”

Lumina transformed, not dramatically, but enough for us to notice. Her hair looked like it had a life of its own. Each strand spread out behind her. Her long black tail and ears stiffened and pointed upward. It was hard to catch, but they were striped now. Black-on-gray, like a tiger. Difficult to see, unless you were really paying attention. Immense amounts

of mana emanated from her with such force that it made my blade rattle. I hadn't felt this kind of power since Linford.

This is...evolution?

"Wow..."

As both of us were taken in by the spectacle, Lumina clenched her fists and dropped into a stance. My Danger Sense went off so hard that it felt like someone was screaming in my ear. Fran felt it too. She fixed her eyes on Lumina's hands.

"Here I go."

"...!"

"Thunderclap."

Lumina only whispered, but our intense focus allowed us to hear.

She disappeared.

The next moment, a terrible flash flew at Fran so fast we didn't have time to be surprised.

"Gah!"

It blew Fran fifteen meters across the room. She hit the ground, then skidded and crashed into a wall. The wall cracked, and Fran probably suffered a couple broken bones.

I-I couldn't see what she did!

I knew what she'd done though—she'd got close and punched. That was it really. It was just really fast and really hard. Lumina stood where Fran had been.

"Urgh..."

Fran pushed the rubble off and slowly got back to her feet. Lumina's punch had landed square on her chest. Fran's breastplate was singed from the impact, and wisps of smoke rose out of it.

Thunderclap. Lumina must've imbued her fists with thunder when she struck. No wonder she put her sword away. With that kind of speed, it would've sliced Fran clean in half.

Fran, talk to me!

"Aargh... Heal..."

Fran was conscious, but coughing up blood. The punch must've punctured her lung. Lumina said she wouldn't kill her...but she didn't say Fran wouldn't be hurt. Still, she had enough faith that Fran could take it and survive.

"Are you all right?! I haven't had this much fun in a long time. I put too much power into it!"

Or maybe not...

"I only wanted to send you flying."

Lumina rushed to Fran and started dousing her with potions. She was back to normal now, no longer in her evolved state.

So what was Thunderclap? Was it a skill? It happened so fast that I couldn't catch it. I remembered what Lumina said about showing Fran a glimpse of the apex. This was a Race Skill, unlocked when a Black Cat became a Black Tiger. I couldn't grasp its true nature...but it told me that Lumina was far more powerful than Fran.

"How are you feeling?"

"Hm. I'm fine."

Fran was still reeling, but her wounds were all healed up. She took Lumina's hand and got up.

"I apologize," said Lumina.

"What for?"

"I got a touch too excited."

"I asked for it. And you showed me how strong a Black Tiger can be. I should be thanking you."

Lumina returned Fran's gaze of admiration with a sheepish smile. Her cheeks were red with embarrassment.

"I-I see," she said.

"Hm."

"You must be tired. Rest a while, have some more tea and cookies."

"Thank you."

Fran took some time to recover. She enjoyed her sweets as she went over the details of the fight with Lumina. When it was over, Lumina sighed.

"Well, I can't keep you here forever. As much as it pains me, you must be on your way."

"Hm..."

Fran nodded, looking as unhappy about it as Lumina was. But Fran knew she had to leave. We had to find out how she could evolve. Aurel would be our first stop. The old wolf's letter was the reason we were here in the first place...

Was that a coincidence? Aurel must've been acquainted with Lumina if he had the gall to send her a message. And he was evolved, so he must know that Lumina was too. How convenient was it that he sent Fran, a Black Cat, to run this specific errand? Did Aurel orchestrate this quest specifically so Fran could meet her? If he did, then there was a good chance that he knew something. Even if he didn't, he owed us enough that we could ask him for help. I really wanted to question him.

"You should use the Return Pillar in the boss room while it's still active. It will take you back to the entrance."

"Will I ever see you again...?"

“Hahaha. All you need do is come here, child. Feel free to drop by any time. I’ll change the dungeon so that the boss won’t spawn when you come in. The path to my quarters will open for you.”

“Hm. All right.”

Lumina ruffled Fran’s hair, and Fran didn’t shy away from it. She leaned in, her ears twitching happily. They stayed like that for a while, until they both knew it was time. Fran slowly moved away.

Are you good?

Hm.

Fran nodded.

“Bye, Lumina.”

I wanted to let Fran enjoy the presence of another tribesman a while longer, but Fran pulled away of her own accord. She walked toward the Return Pillar at the center of the boss room.

“See you again.”

“Hm...”

Fran looked back before finally walking into the light. It wrapped around us and we floated as it took us back to the entrance. Before the process was complete, Lumina shouted after her.

“There is a way! A narrow way, but worth all the effort in the world!”

With Lumina’s words of encouragement, we were transported back to the surface, to the dungeon entrance we last saw a few days ago.

All right, let’s get back to Aurel and tell him that we’ve completed his quest!

“Yeah!”

Fran nodded enthusiastically. The great strides in her gait suggested that she wasn't feeling lonely any more.

Hope he can give us some evolution info.

"Hm."

We were about to leave the garrison when a crowd of guards and adventurers surrounded us. The adventurers saw us get transported out just as they were about to enter.

"Wow! You came back in one piece!"

"You came back with the Return Pillar, does that you beat the boss by yourself?"

"She rounded up those bandits by herself, too, you know!"

"You're a solo? We'd love to have you in our party!"

They all welcomed her with open arms. Beating the boss carried with it some degree of prestige in this town. The fact that Fran cleared the East Dungeon meant she had joined the ranks of Ulmutt's finest. The feat was made more impressive by the fact that Fran ran solo. Even with Jet as her familiar, it was unheard of for a child to clear the dungeon on her own.

Questions from excited adventurers came at her one after the other. Every answer she gave was greeted with genuine "oohs" and "aahs." Even the hard-strung adults looked at her with admiration. The scene tickled me, but I was genuinely glad that Fran was finally getting the respect she deserved.

"You beat the High Ogre mob on your own?"

"Yo, those traps, though!"

"Which boss did you end up fighting?"

The questions wouldn't stop. In the end, Ulmutt's favorite muscled woman came to Fran's rescue.

"All right, boys and girls, give her some space."

"Elza."

"It's been forever, Frannie! I was so worried about you."

"Hm. I had to train."

"I know, sweetie. But I couldn't help myself!" Elza squirmed, clearly sincerely worried. I appreciated the thought. "And I know the dungeon boss can be so tough. The stronger you are, the stronger it gets, can you believe it? I wouldn't be surprised if you got fixed with a C-Threat or above!"

"Hm. That's what I got."

"Really? Are you hurt?!"

"I'm fine now."

"*Now?! Oh, so you *did* get hurt!* I wouldn't have let anything touch you if I had been there!"

"Wouldn't have been able to train that way."

"I suppose not... And you're so cute when you act all tough like that! But to think that you took on a C-Threat all on your own. I knew you were special!"

Wait, what was Elza doing here? Was it pure coincidence?

"Didn't you have something to tell her, ma'am?"

"Oh, that's right!"

Guess not. Elza had told the guard to inform her when Fran got out.

"Sorry about that. It's been so long since I saw her that I plum forgot! Tee-hee!"

"You wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes! The Guildmaster is calling for you. There's other things you need to know, too, but we should get back

for now.”

“But I have to go tell Aurel I finished his quest.”

Lumina did ask us to send a message to the Guildmaster. We can stop by the guild first.

“Hm? I guess we can go to the guild.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stop by Aurel’s before we do?”

“Yeah.”

And so, we followed Elza to the Adventurer’s Guild. This time, however, we didn’t take the rooftop shortcut. For some reason, we were using the road like everyone else.

“We’re not going up?”

“Well, the GM strictly ordered me not to make a ruckus. He said to take our time and use the roads, even if took a little longer.”

“Why?”

“He has his reasons, I guess. I know one of them, though I can’t say I know the rest. He was being uncharacteristically serious.”

“Tell me about the reason you know.”

“I’ll explain at the guild. Just don’t let your guard down.”

“All right.”

Whatever Dias’s reasons, they must be pretty serious to make him stop joking around. Fran followed Elza, keeping an eye on her surroundings. As we were on our way, I remembered something important.

Since we’re going to see the Guildmaster, do you think I should level up Thought Disruption? Dias probably wouldn’t try anything funny with us, but just in case.

Hm. Good idea. It's still at Level 1.

One problem though. What would Dias think if I showed up with a maxed-out Thought Disruption? Even though we had been training, I was afraid that Dias would be suspicious if we were suddenly protected against Mind Read.

A little late to be worried about that. He already knows you're an Intelligent Weapon.

You think so?

Hm. Just tell him you have strange powers that allow you to level up faster. He'll buy it. You won't be lying either.

I guess I didn't know my own strength. I hadn't thought much of myself since I learned about the existence of Godswords. Sure, I kept my existence a secret...but that was the space Intelligent Weapons occupied, I suppose. Much stronger than magic weapons, but not quite at Godsword levels.

So "I'm an Intelligent Weapon, you know" was the greatest throwaway excuse we had. It accounted for all my strangeness and wonders.

Seriously though?

Hm. You are an Intelligent Weapon, you know.

Well, when you put it that way... Wow, it really is persuasive.

I would level up Thought Disruption then. I used up 18 EP to boost it to Level 10.

Thought Disruption is at max level. Thought Disruption has been upgraded to Thought Protection.

Nice, it got an upgrade! We'd never have to worry about Mind Read or Mental Suggestion again. I could adjust

the level of protection, too, to let some of my thoughts be read as a distraction. Only mind readers and telepaths need apply of course.

What about the other skills?

I'll raise them later. We have to be careful with our EP usage.

All right.

Just give it some thought and tell me if anything comes to mind.

Sure.

Fran would probably want Advanced Sword Mastery, but I was more than happy to level something else. She was the one using the skills after all. I used them, too, but only in my capacity as her weapon. Whatever she wanted took priority. Ever since the Linford fight, I'd been interested in seeing her ideas too.

Elza stopped just as we were getting close to the guild.

"Ugh! I hate this crowd."

Where'd all these people come from?

The crowd wasn't moving either—they just stood there, looking at something. Needless to say, it made pedestrian traffic all the worse.

Did something happen?

"Elza, did something happen?"

"Looks like foreign nobility just got into town. They must want to watch the upcoming tournament. This is the busiest time of year in Ulmutt. The town's going to be packed soon enough."

So that's it. Pedestrians were put on hold so the noble could pass through. It wasn't as bad as a daimyo procession, but commoners still had to make way.

“There’s nothing we can do about it...except take to the rooftops,” said Elza.

“Can we?”

“It’ll only take a second. Beats waiting out this crowd, that’s for sure.”

“All right.”

Dias specifically said we shouldn’t draw attention to ourselves...but Elza had already jumped, and Fran followed after her. I could see the entire crowd from up here.

I guess that’s the aristocrat’s carriage.

It was the most grandiose thing I’d seen since I got to this world. Its roof was decorated with a statue of a golden lion which glowed as its details caught the light. The carriage itself was made of shining blackwood, gorgeously decorated with gold and silver. The horse was gigantic and didn’t look spooked by the onlookers. It must have been well-trained. This carriage didn’t belong to bottom-feeding nobility, that’s for sure.

But why the lax security? This kind of high profile visitor should have dozens of heavily-armed guards protecting them. Why was there no convoy? I spotted one coachman and two guards, one on each side. That brought the grand total to a whopping three. I knew this was Ulmutt, but it still seemed like carelessness. Then I took a closer look at the cabbie and the guards and found that I was completely wrong.

They’re strong.

I could tell just by the way they carried themselves.

I don’t think they’ll figure out I’m the one identifying them from this far...

Fran was already dashing across the shingles, so I could only identify one of them. But even then...

Excuse me?!

What is it, Teacher?

That guard...he's insanely strong.

Way stronger than I could ever imagine.

Name: Gaudartha

Age: 44

Race: White Rhinoceros/Blackiron Rhinoceros

Class: Marauder

Level: 72/99

HP: 1256; Magic: 422; Strength: 654; Agility: 267

Skills: Intimidate 8; Brute Strength 8; Punch Arts 5; Punch Mastery 5; Presence Sense 3; Fast Regeneration 4; Brute Force 10; Club Arts 6; Club Mastery 6; Mining 8; Regeneration 10; Abnormal Status Resistance 7; Blink 3; Mental Status Resistance 7; Elemental Blade 8; Rush 7; Axe Arts 10; Axe Mastery 10; Advanced Axe Arts 6; Advanced Axe Mastery 7; Mana Sense 3; Spirit Control; Goblin Killer; Dull Pain; Dragon Killer; Tough Hide

Class Skill: Awaken; Wave Blast

Titles: Protector; Great Mountain; Dungeon Conqueror; Dragon Killer; A-Rank Adventurer

Equipment: Earth Dragon Horn Greataxe; Earth Dragon Scale Armor; Fire Gland Cloak; Decoy Bracelet; Poison Sense Ring

An A-Rank adventurer *and* an evolved beastman? The bodyguard was easily as strong as Amanda. Did that mean the other two were just as strong? No wonder there were

only three of them. They were enough to level Ulmutt if it came down to it. I told Fran of my findings and she responded with great excitement.

Wow! Rhino beastmen are famous for being really strong. You don't see many of them though.

Huh. Really?

Gaudartha was the first rhino beastman I'd seen in this world. Maybe they were just as endangered here as they were in my world. He looked like a regular human, just really big.

Of particular interest were his Brute Strength and Spirit Control, along with the Class Skills Awaken and Wave Blast. I didn't have time to examine each skill, but figured that Brute Strength was an upgrade of Brute Force and Spirit Control of Spirit Manipulation. If our match with Lumina were any indication, he'd obtained Awaken upon evolution, which left Wave Blast as the mystery skill. I wondered if the guild archives had any records of it. Or maybe we should just ask Aurel—the old beastman should know a thing or two from his previous life as an adventurer. He might even know the rhino personally.

Yeah, let's go ask him! Fran agreed heartily.

We were crossing paths with a lot of evolved beastmen.

I hope one of them can tell us something about evolution.

Aside

“SO, HOW ARE you feeling?”

“It’s you. I’m feeling great! And this sword is amazing! So much power!”

“Good. I trust that your arm and leg are doing fine?”

“You bet! I didn’t think your potion would be able to regrow them. Are you sure I can have that for free?”

“You’re going to work for that potion soon enough.”

“Shit, fine! I’ll do anything you want! I feel like a million bucks right now!”

“Before you run off, can you get a hold of the ingredients for the drug?”

“Aaah, about that. Mimic Venomcrawler sacs aren’t a problem, but the venom sac of a Pandemic Leech is downright impossible to get.”

“I hope you’re exaggerating.”

“Sorry, but I’m not. The guild has all the venom sacs in circulation, and no one’s seen a Pandemic Leech in a while.”

“Damn it. No use in sending out Seldio anymore.”

“This is all that girl’s fault... That...little...*bitch!*”

“Hey, keep it down.”

“Heh heh, sorry. I just felt like shouting from the rooftops, you know. Wonder why that is.”

“So the sword and the drug...”

“What’s that?”

“Oh, nothing. In any case, I have a job for you. I need you to take something from someone.”

“All right. What and from who?”

“The magic sword of the little girl you’re so furious at. Fran, was it?”

“Her sword? I gotta admit even I felt something from it. Seemed powerful.”

“Do what you want with the girl, she doesn’t matter. Although I advise killing her before taking the sword.”

“Sure. Heh heh. Oh, I can’t wait to make that bitch suffer!”

“Well and good, just try not to get caught. Our master won’t let any of us off if you fail this time...”

“I know. Trust me, that guy scares the crap out of me too. I’m in a worse position than any of you because of my previous mess-up. But we all have to find joy in our work, right?”

“We’ll lend you Seldio and Dahlum. Use them as you will.”

“Whoa, you sure? It’d be a shame to lose Seldio now.”

“We have no other option. We will all die if we don’t get the drug. Might as well get the most out of him while we can. He’s a little finicky, but the drug should make him obey.”

“I didn’t know you could use the drug for that! I thought it just killed people or made them dumb!”

“Only if you overdose. Proper dosing brings many benefits.”

“Is that why I’ve been so giddy? Because you used that drug on me?”

“And if I did?”

“Then I don’t give a damn! I’m just shocked at how happy I am! You should’ve given me more! Bahahaha!”

“Good. You needed the drug anyway, to use the sword.”

“I see, I see, well no one’s to blame then! Such great power doesn’t come for free! Hyahahaha! Can you feel it? All this power from the sword!”

“Calm down. Remember, you’re still a wanted man.”

“Sorry, sorry. So, when do I start?”

“She has a guard with her at the moment. We’ll distract him, and that’s when you’ll strike.”

“Got it. You leave that little bitch to me! I’m going to kill her so hard...there won’t be anything left to mourn!”

“Don’t forget the sword, Solus.”

“Heh heh! I know, I know!”

Chapter 5: Broken Will

WE RETURNED TO THE GUILD, where Dias welcomed us. He looked exhausted.

“You’re back.”

“Hm. They said you wanted to see me.”

“Yes. It’s a long story, so please have a seat.”

“All right.”

Dias must’ve run into some kind of trouble; Fran-related trouble at that.

Fran, you should give Dias his message first.

Hm.

Fran sank into the sofa and turned to face the Guildmaster. “You have a message from Lumina: Uphold your end of the bargain.”

“Lumina?” Elza asked. “Who’s that?”

Dias sighed. “That would be a secret, Elza.”

He put his index finger to his lips. Uh-oh. I guess Elza wasn’t supposed to know. Had we goofed by mentioning Lumina now?

“Oh, all right,” said Elza. “Fine. I’m not supposed to know.”

“Sorry about this.”

“A woman knows that every man is entitled to a few secrets.” Elza pursued the subject no further, despite her evident curiosity. She gave a playful wink, but seemed to

understand Dias's position as Guildmaster and the confidentiality that went with it.

"I've finished up some quests too," said Fran.

"Did you? Let's see then."

"This one, and this one—"

Fran took out the files for the quests she'd finished. There were nine extermination quests in total. Unfortunately, we didn't make the twenty-three required to rank up, because the rest were collection quests.

"May I have your guild card?"

"Hm. Here."

"Hmm. Very impressive. You've finished all of your extermination quests."

"That's amazing, Frannie! I knew you could do it!"

The guild card recorded everything that Fran killed in the dungeon. Her progress surprised them both. Adventurers usually avoided needless encounters and steered clear of any monsters they didn't need to kill. We, on the other hand, killed everything in sight, causing us to overshoot the extermination requirements by a dozen or so.

"Even a D-Rank party would have trouble achieving these kinds of results."

"You must've gathered a lot of materials. Have you disassembled them? How are your collection quests doing?"

"I took them apart, yeah."

We weren't lacking there, either. I'd butchered everything while Fran was asleep.

"Can you put them over there?"

Dias pointed to a sheet that Elza had laid out. It was made of elastic, congealed slime fluids, but really, it looked

like a tarp. It was even blue, since that was the color of the slime.

“Right here?”

“That’s why we brought it here. Just lay out the materials for submission.”

“Sure.”

Fran put her items on the sheet: a High Ogre horn as thick as a man’s arm; a Mimic Venomcrawler’s red and purple venom sac; and a myriad of other stuff we found in the dungeon. We had to be especially careful with the venom sacs. I didn’t think Dias and Elza would die if they burst, but painting the walls of the Guildmaster’s office with venom sounded like an awful time for everyone.

“They’re all in good condition and of high quality. You’ll turn all of this in for submission then?” asked Dias.

“Yeah.”

“All right. Together with the extermination quests, you finished a grand total of seventeen quests in the dungeon. Together with the boss extermination, you only have five quests left before you can rank-up.”

“Just a little bit more, Frannie. I believe in you!”

This final stretch was going to be the most troublesome though. The only collection quests left involved Dirty Wisps and other monsters with low encounter rates. Farming for their materials was going to take time. There weren’t many of the creatures to begin with, and they were very good at camouflage. We lucked out when that one wisp ambushed us. Actively seeking them out was going to be a pain. Finishing this batch of quests might take even longer than our last run. Not to mention Fran still needed to see Aurel, *and* there was still the tournament to think about. We could finish these quests after that.

Fran told Dias of our plans, but he looked pensive.

"Hmm... We would really like it if you ranked-up sooner rather than later."

"Oh, come on," Elza said in Fran's defense. "Fran will be fine. The people in town know how good she is. I don't think anyone would be dumb enough to pick a fight with her."

"For now, yes. But you know a lot more adventurers are going to visit Ulmutt soon."

"I guess."

"So there you have it. Can you finish these quests soon?"

"Hm."

We didn't mind, but there was one problem.

"I'll finish them if I can sign up for the tournament."

Fran wasn't personally invited, which meant she would have to sign up in person. Registrations opened the day after tomorrow. You could sign up at the guild, the stadium, and other approved establishments. Applicants needed to present their identification in person, and could not be represented by other parties. We didn't know how long wrapping up these quests would take, so we wanted to apply before diving back into the dungeon.

"Oh, you won't have to go through the trouble. We'll sign up for you."

"But they said I had to sign up in person."

"As it happens, the guild has some invitations left over. Make it to C-Rank, and consider yourself cordially invited."

Really? The guild's invitation carried a lot of weight. You had to be strong *and* well-mannered to represent the guild.

“Don’t worry about it. We’re the ones rushing you through the rank-up process anyway. It’s the least we could do. So get back into that dungeon!”

Dias was acting shady. Why the sudden special treatment? Sure, we knew Klimt and Amanda personally, but doing so many favors for a mere D-Rank? It seemed suspicious. He also really wanted us to go back to the dungeon for some reason, and for an extended period of time at that.

Elza didn’t buy it either. She rested her chin on her hand and tilted her head. “You’re acting fishy, Dias.”

“Hahahaha. What are you talking about? I’m always fishy.”

“You’re fishier than usual,” said Fran.

“She’s right. What’s going on here? I can tell something’s bothering you. Are you plotting something again?”

“You’re imagining things, Elza. I assure you.”

Dias maintained his smile and composure.

“Are you sure you’re not just making Fran jump through hoops as a joke?”

“Are you?” Fran asked.

“No, no.”

Something stank all right. But I didn’t think we’d get anything out of him, even if we interrogated him all day. Elza drew close to Dias and muttered.

“You’re hiding something.”

“Uhh...heh heh. Well, you got me there.”

“It’s my woman’s intuition!”

I didn't know how far we could trust Elza's womanly intuition, but she did have the skill for it, and had known Dias for a long time.

It was time for our trump card.

Fran, whip it out.

"Hm!"

Fran brandished Klimt's referral letter like a sword. I wasn't expecting much from it, but it couldn't hurt.

"The truth, Dias."

"Wh-what do you think I've been saying all this while?"

His eyes started watering. The old man really was terrified.

"We know you're hiding something."

"I assure you, I am not." His voice was warbling now. A little more pressure and we'd have him.

"I'll tell Klimt and Amanda that you've been mean to me."

"I'm sorry!"

Dias snapped into a pose of genuflection, like the A-Rank adventurer he was. He even managed to sweep the surface of his massive desk clean in the process.

"I'm so sorry! Please!"

"G-Guildmaster, get a hold of yourself! What *is* that letter, Frannie?"

Elza looked at Fran and then back to Dias. Little wonder, too, since the letter was enough to make Ulmutt's Guildmaster cower in fear. An old man prostrating himself before a child was a rare sight to behold.

"Elza, do you have messenger falcons here?"

"Of course, honey."

“Hm. I need to send a message to Kli—”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Please don’t tell on me!”

Dias’s career would be over if word got out that he’d “been mean” to Fran. If Amanda caught wind of it, his actual life would be in danger.

“Start talking.”

“Yes, all right. I was doing it for your sake, Fran. Really.”

We would be the judge of that. “Just spit it out,” Fran ordered.

Dias sighed in resignation. “You know the influx of aristocrats visiting Ulmutt?”

“Hm.”

“It has something to do with one of them.”

“Who?”

“The Beast King.”

“Oh my! I didn’t think we’d be hosting such an important guest this year!” Elza sounded genuinely surprised. Whoever this Beast King was, he must’ve been famous.

“He’s a big deal?”

“You don’t know about him, Frannie?”

“I think I might have heard about him at some point.”

I was drawing a complete blank.

“You should learn about him,” said Elza. “Since you’re a beastman, too.”

As his title implied, the Beast King was the king of all the beastman tribes and regent of their country. All beastmen, regardless of nationality, respected him, and his influence made him a force to be reckoned with. The beastmen’s lands were in another country, but they were on

friendly terms with Granzell. The Beast King visited the tournament in Ulmutt once every few years as a show of goodwill.

“He had to come this year, of all years,” Dias said.

“You don’t sound like you want him around.”

“I have my reasons. Also, we have Fran with us this year.”

“Hm?”

What was that supposed to mean? We had never met the Beast King—we didn’t even know his name.

“I don’t have to ask you to elaborate on the strained relations between the Black Cat and Blue Cat tribes,” said Dias. “Do I?”

“Blue Cats are the enemy.”

“They’re not all bad, but...that’s a discussion for another day. Suffice to say, the Blue Cats were the first to enslave the Black Cat tribe, once upon a time. Now, there are rumors that the ancestor of the reigning Beast King had a role to play in the Black Cats’ enslavement. The king himself was Red Cat royalty, but his underlings were rumored to be Blue Cats.”

“Huh,” said Elza. “I didn’t know that.”

“Hm.”

“It’s something the beastmen would sooner forget. The subject is taboo to even mention in their country. The Beast King of that time has long since died of course. But the Blue Cats are still closely involved with the current ruler.”

Which meant there was a possibility that the Blue Cats were enslaving Black Cats under the Beast King’s orders? The theory wasn’t too far-fetched. There were instances in the history of my own world where the weak were enslaved

to make the strong feel better about themselves. Black Cats were weak and unable to evolve, which made them the perfect sacrifice.

“The current Beast King isn’t too popular with his people either,” Dias went on. “He staged a coup to get to where he is now.”

“I heard about that,” said Elza. “The Patricide Usurper of the Gold Lions.”

“Not someone who loves Black Cats. In fact, he might not be above committing atrocities himself.”

This was a vital piece of information. We were going to have to be careful around all beastmen for a while.

Beast King...

Was he the one riding in the carriage we saw?

I remembered the beautiful cart with its monstrous bodyguards. The Beast King was of the lion tribes, and the cart’s roof had been decorated with the image of a lion. As if his political influence wasn’t terrifying enough, there was still his physical prowess to worry about. We might not end up being enemies, but we had no way of winning against him, even if we pulled out all the stops. And he was evolved too...

So...assassination? Fran suggested.

No! We don’t have to fight him! Cool it, Fran.

She already had a terrible impression of this man. If we met him, we would have to be careful. Fran might lose it and attack him on the spot...enough to land her on death row. Actual assassination might cause a war. I would stop her if I had to.

“So, I thought to myself, what if such a person heard stories about you while he was in town? I didn’t think anything good could come of it, that’s for sure...”

“That’s why you want her to crawl the dungeon for as long as she can?” Elza asked. “So she won’t run into the Beast King?”

“Precisely. If Fran can get up to C-Rank by the time the tournament starts, the guild can issue a Personal Quest to protect her.”

“Personal Quest?”

Never heard that one before. Elza explained it was when the guild asked for a specific adventurer to carry out a quest. The adventurer in question had the right to refuse of course. Personal Quests were very important to the guild, and they supported the adventurer anyway it could for the duration. Getting in the way of an adventurer undertaking a Personal Quest was the same as picking a fight with the entire guild.

The Adventurer’s Guild was a long-established organization and a necessary part of life in this world. There wasn’t a nation on earth who had the nerve to mess with it. Under a Personal Quest, Fran should be safe from the Beast King’s abuses of power.

“But you can’t just hand out Personal Quests any day of the year.”

“Don’t worry about that. We’ll just make the quests dungeon-related. I’m the only one who can negotiate with the Dungeon Master, remember? I’ll just say that she needed a certain item or something. I’ll make something up.”

“So that’s why you want her to be a C-Rank. She needs to be at least that to take on a Personal Quest.”

“Exactly.”

Dias really was thinking about Fran’s well-being. But he was so shady that I had trouble believing it. I still wouldn’t have believed him if I didn’t have Essence of Falsehood.

“You could’ve just told us that from the start.”

“If I told Fran, I was afraid *she* would take interest in the Beast King.”

He wasn’t wrong there. The discussion definitely piqued her interest.

“So you brought Fran here to tell her about him?” asked Elza.

“In my own long-winded way, yes. Don’t go anywhere near him, just in case he gets offended by you.”

That was also why Dias advised us not to draw attention to ourselves on the way back to the guild.

“In any case,” he said. “I hope you can rank-up sooner rather than later, Fran.”

“Sure.”

We had no other choice, now that we knew the circumstances. Fran’s life was on the line.

“Try to do so before the tournament. All eyes are going to be on you if you participate.”

“Hm.”

We didn’t know who we would be up against, but we were aiming for number one. If a Black Cat girl managed to perform even somewhat decently in the tournament, she would definitely catch the Beast King’s eye.

“I’ll leave an invitation for you.”

“Don’t need it.”

“Any reason? You can fight in the main matches immediately when you’re invited.”

“I want to go through the qualifiers.”

“Frannie,” said Elza. “The qualifiers are completely randomized. You might run into someone terribly strong for

your first match.”

“I don’t mind.”

Fran nodded enthusiastically. To her, a fighting tournament was a chance to fight a lot of interesting people. She wasn’t about to miss the qualifiers.

“W-well, if you say so,” said Dias. “I’ll arrange for you to take part.”

“Frannie’s so obsessed with fighting, but that side of you is cute too!”

That settled the tournament, but I had one more question. I understood why letting Fran meet the Beast King was a bad idea, but why go through the trouble of warning her to rank-up and sending her to the dungeon?

“Why are you doing all this for me?”

Even adventurer solidarity had its limits.

“I have my reasons. Let’s just say I’m upholding my end of the bargain with a certain someone.”

This was Dias’s deal with Lumina. She must’ve asked him to protect any Black Cats that came to Ulmutt. He didn’t specifically mention her name, since Elza was around.

“Make sure to thank her the next time you see her.”

“Hm. I will.”

“More secrets? It must be nice being so close.”

We were headed to the dungeon again, so we might as well see her then.

We need to thank Aurel too. He was the one who gave us the chance to meet Lumina.

Hm.

We would go to Aurel’s mansion after wrapping things up at the guild. First, we had some leftover materials from

the collection quests.

“I have some other materials to sell. Can I leave them here?”

“That...would be a problem. You’ll have to go to appraisal for that.”

“Hm.”

“Elza, could you please show Fran the way?”

“You didn’t have to ask!”

Yeah, plopping our stuff in Dias’s office would’ve ended poorly.

“I still need to talk to you, so come back when you’re done with appraising.”

Huh, I thought the Beast King was the only thing Dias wanted to talk about.

“Why not tell me now?”

“It’s...a long story. Just come back here before you leave the guildhouse.”

“All right.”

Fran looked at Elza, who looked worried. Whatever Dias had planned, it wasn’t good news. That said, I was curious to hear what he had to say. We would make sure to drop by after we finished selling stuff.

“Over here, sweetie.”

“Hm.”

Elza led us to the guild’s carving room. The pillbug was still in one piece, and I didn’t think the guild would buy a whole monster carcass, but we should be fine. We just needed to pay the guild to butcher it for us. Elza explained that carving fees differed depending on the size and difficulty of the monster.

“It shouldn’t cost more than 40,000, I don’t think. The last time Hundred Blade Forlund was here, he brought in a B-Rank wyvern and that only cost about 40 to 50,000. Have you heard of him, by the way? Sir Forlund?”

“Hm. I met him in Bulbola.”

“Oh, I’m so jealous! He’s so amazing, I want to have him all to myself! Don’t you think so, Fran?”

“Hm. He’s strong. I want to be as strong as him someday.”

“No, that’s not what I’m talking about! I mean that he’s so cool and composed, he’s totally my type.”

Elza wriggled and giggled like a schoolgirl talking about her crush. She was definitely growing on me, because she actually looked like a schoolgirl for a second there.

“Hm?”

“Ah, to have him scoop me up in those strong arms and whisper sweet nothings in my ear!”

Forlund was rough around the edges, but that came with the territory. He was good-looking, I’d give him that much. For the first time in both my lives, I felt sorry for the handsome men of the world. We all had our crosses to bear.

Just keep nodding.

“Hm.”

“You know what I’m talking about, Fran?”

“Hm.”

“Right? Isn’t he the coolest?”

“Hm.”

“We have so much in common with each other!”

“Hm.”

Fran kept nodding while she took the monster materials out of her Pocket Dimension. The clerk in charge of appraisals could only stare at the strange sight.

“Should I take the pillbug out too?”

“H-huh? Uh, sure. Go for it.”

“Hm.”

Fran took out the whole carcass of the Disaster Pillbug. Its body smelled of smoke from thunder magic, and the stink of the liquid leaking from its carcass soon spread through the entire room. The gigantic body occupied over half the guild’s largest carving table.

Even the experienced butchers squirmed. Insect monsters might be animals, but they were a particularly grotesque kind of animal. Now make that grotesque animal gigantic, and you could forgive them for almost losing their lunch. Still, our butcher maintained his professional spirit and stepped in to take a closer look.

However, not everyone was as brave.

“Gyaaaaa!”

“Elza?”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaa!”

A baritone screech shook the room.

“What is it?”

“I-It’s a bug!”

“Yeah, it’s a pillbug.”

“Eeeek!”

Elza grew paler the longer she looked at it. She pressed her hands against her chest and her knees rattled like shingles on a windy day. With sheer terror.

“Uh. Elza?”

“Aaaaaaaa—”

Fran, who didn't have any animals she was afraid of, couldn't understand Elza's distress. She looked at her with a mix of worry and bewilderment. The fear seemed to have spread from Elza to the guild's butcher, who grabbed Elza and tried desperately to calm her down.

“E-Elza, please! Calm down! That's not a bug!”

“B-but it is!”

“It just looks like a bug, I promise!”

“Th-that doesn't make me feel better!”

“Think about it, how can a bug be so huge?”

“A huge...b-bug?!”

“Ah crap!”

“Urrgggghh—”

“Th-this is bad! H-hey! You have to put that thing away, stat!”

Fran, put away the pillbug! Elza looks like she's about to go south!

I didn't know what was going to happen, but I did sense Elza entering fight mode. Fran felt the danger, too, and quickly did as I said.

“Elza! It's okay now! See? No more bugs!”

“Wh-where'd it go...?”

“I put it away.”

“I-I see...”

Elza's mounting aggression faded, and she sat down on the floor with a thud. Crisis averted, the guild butcher breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thanks. You saved us all!”

“What happened to her?”

“Elza’s bad with all things insect-related. Thing is, she goes into a wild frenzy when she gets too afraid.”

I remembered Elza’s Berserk Skill. I didn’t expect it to be so literal...

“To make matters worse, she can use all her other skills even while Berserk is active.”

“How does it work in dungeons?”

“Not too well.”

Elza could still keep up in battle, but her party members would often get caught in her blind frenzy, and you could say goodbye to any monster parts that needed to be handled with care. While she could cope with small insects to a certain degree, a swarm of them or an aphid jumping into her face would immediately send her Berserk. Needless to say, she had a hard time finding parties that wanted to work with her.

“The last time, she lost it in the guild lobby. Sent twenty people to the infirmary that day.”

“Sounds rough.”

“Very. She’d be more popular if she could get a handle on it. Would help if she weren’t so, uh...vain too.” The guild butcher looked exhausted.

“Are you okay, Elza?”

“Frannie... I’m so sorry. Bugs are my only weakness!”

As much as I wanted to know why, I had the feeling that probing her about the reasons for her bug phobia would instantly trigger Berserk. Dropping the matter would probably ensure the least casualties.

“You should leave the room.”

“I will. Call me when you’re done, I’ll be having my tea.”

The appraisal room fell silent, then it was back to business as usual. The pillbug was difficult to butcher and cost 30,000 Gold in fees. Its materials sold for an even 560,000, which netted a profit of 530,000 Gold.

It seemed like a lot, but the lack of crystals and its beat-up exterior knocked its value down by about half. Still, it was more than ten times the price of a High Ogre horn. Together with the materials we got from killing monsters on our way to Ulmutt, we were swimming in 800,000 Gold, and we still had the reward money from our completed quests to take into account. Our short stay in Ulmutt had already made us a lot of money, even if we had to put our lives on the line for it.

“Frannie, are you done?”

We collected our earnings and headed to the bar. Elza was having tea with an old man there. Yes, the guild bar really *did* serve tea. In a beautiful teapot with a flower-patterned teacup no less. Accompanied by jam and scones. The bar felt more like a cafe than a drinking joint.

“Yeah.”

“You wanna have some too?”

“Of course.”

Fran was never one to refuse food and drink.

“We have red tea, black tea, and Ulm Tea.”

“Why so many?”

The guild bar was strange. They had the usual stock of alcohol, but tea clearly wasn’t an afterthought either. Some of it was even used in cocktails.

"Red tea goes well with scones, and black with cookies. If it's pie you want, then Ulm tea's your best bet."

"I'll take all of them," said Fran.

"Oh? But will you be able to finish it all?"

"No problem."

"You heard the girl, barkeep."

"Coming right up."

The middle-aged barkeep wore the professional uniform of bartenders the worlds over, and looked a little out of place in a rowdy adventurers' pub. He would have been much more at home in a classy bar or cafe. Fran tilted her head.

"This is a bar for adventurers?"

"That's right," said Elza.

"Hahaha. We get that a lot," the barkeep laughed wryly. He'd heard this question a million times before. "This is the bar of the Adventurer's Guild. If you're wondering about our selection of sweets and teas, it's because Elza asked me to stock them."

"Our barkeep makes the best tea! Some of the naughty children gave him a hard time for it, but a spanking or two made everyone line up! Tea is as popular as the alcoholic drinks now."

"The adventurers heard that the Guildmaster and Elza don't drink. If Dias is around, most folks will switch to tea."

So people actually went to the trouble of trying not to offend the guild's top two adventurers? Or maybe Dias and Elza were just abusing their power. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like the adventurers were doing it out of fear rather than respect.

"Here is your grand selection of sweets, along with red tea to start."

“Hm.”

Fran took the scone, speedily spread some clotted cream and jam on it, and finished it. If you blinked, you would’ve missed it. Elza smiled at Fran’s great appetite. She stuck out her pinkie while sipping her tea. Impressive etiquette.

The white-haired old man seated across from us watched Fran like he was watching his own grandchild. Judging by his equipment, he was an adventurer.

“Hohoho. That’s a mighty appetite you got there.”

“Who are you?”

“Where are my manners? The name’s Radule. Just your average C-Rank.”

“Radule’s the oldest adventurer in Ulmutt,” Elza introduced.

Radule was a mage with white hair and a white beard. He looked like a classic wizard. He probably substituted hard-earned experience and wisdom for youthful stamina in battle—though that was probably also why his rank wasn’t higher.

“He’s strong, but for most of his life, he was a court mage. That’s why his rank doesn’t indicate his real strength. He’s definitely more of a B-Rank than a C-Rank.”

“I’m sad you didn’t call me an A-Rank.”

“You know those people live on a different plane from us.”

“I’m not one to mess with them either. Would be a waste of time, both mine and theirs. But a Black Cat adventurer...” Radule looked nostalgic as he gazed at Fran. “It’s been fifty years, at least.”

“But Fran’s not the first Black Cat to pass through Ulmutt,” said Elza. “We get a lot of Black Cat recruits.”

“True enough. But one so young and so strong? Fifty years.”

“I guess,” Elza said. “So, what? You met someone like Fran fifty years ago?”

“That’s right. She was a lot like you too. Everything from your curt speech to your black hair. I don’t remember her name, but I can never forget her sharp eyes.”

Radule stroked his beard as if to extract the memories from it.

“I think she said she was fifteen at the time. Solo. Didn’t spare a bit of mercy for anyone who talked trash about her tribe. She clashed with the Blue Cat adventurers a lot—even went so far as nearly cutting the tail off one of them.”

“That sounds like Fran all right,” Elza agreed. She really was beginning to understand her.

“I think people just called her ‘Black Cat,’ if you can believe it. I remember those rumors: ‘Anyone who messes with the Black Cat meets an unlucky end.’”

“Where is she now?” Fran asked inquisitively.

Radule shook his head in resignation.

“Who knows? She just disappeared one day. We don’t know whether she died in the dungeons or left town.”

“Oh...”

A Black Cat that strong would be striving for evolution. Fifty years wasn’t so long ago; there must be someone who still remembered her. But why would she suddenly disappear?

"I wasn't that close with Black Cat. But I was in a party with Aurel at the time and I guarantee you that he still remembers her. You know Aurel?"

"But why would old Aurel still remember? He's about as old as you are."

"Because they're both beastmen. Also, I happened to see them get friendly on a couple occasions. See, the Black Cat saved him from a tough spot in a dungeon back in his solo days. He warned the rest of us not to lay a hand on her. But considering what a looker she was...felt to me like he was just hitting on her."

"Ooooh, was she pretty?" Elza asked.

"Yep. Just between you and me, I think old Aurel had feelings for her."

"Oh my gods!" said Elza. "The old man doesn't seem to be the type to like younger girls."

"You're one to talk. And you gotta remember that Aurel was in his teens then too. He was the Genius D-Rank. We all poked fun at how fast he climbed the ranks."

The whole conversation reminded me that Radule, Aurel, and Dias were all young once, difficult as it was to imagine. We had another reason to see Aurel now, and we couldn't wait.

We just needed to see the Guildmaster again first.

Thirty minutes later, we parted with Elza and returned to the Guildmaster's office.

"You sure took your time... You have a little something on your lips."

"Hm. The food was good."

"Of...course."

Not happening, Dias. You can't shame Fran by being that roundabout!

Fran went on through what she assumed to be Dias's smalltalk.

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Well..."

Dias hesitated. I thought he was being catty since we made him wait too long, but that wasn't the case. Something terrible had happened.

"Well?"

"Solus escaped."

"What?!"

"I'm afraid that's how it is."

"I see..." Fran muttered, tightening her fists.

It was a subtle motion, but all her anger was focused into it. Solus currently topped her inner kill list.

"I'm sorry. After you went through all that trouble to capture him too."

Dias bowed his head in apology and explained the circumstances. Solus massacred the entire prison before escaping. Dias apologized, but I didn't see how this was under the guild's jurisdiction. Keeping convicted felons under lock and key was the town guard's job.

"He might have had an accomplice."

I see.

Under normal circumstances, it would've been impossible for Solus to break out on his own.

"There is also a possibility that he's looking for Fran right now."

Dias went on to explain the assaults on adventurers that took place not long after Solus's escape. Adventurers on their way to the dungeon were attacked, and asked if they knew where Fran was. We had good reason to believe Solus was the one behind it, but the witnesses said the perpetrator had all of his limbs intact.

It was clear that Solus wanted to get even with Fran, or worse.

This is bad...

"Let him come, so I can cut him up again. Saves us time looking for him."

"That would be the optimal outcome, believe it or not... But you might attract the Beast King's attention that way."

Anything but that!

If the carriage we saw belonged to the Beast King, we definitely didn't want to get on his bad side. His bodyguards were monstrous.

"I'm confident in your abilities, Fran. But we don't know how strong Solus is, or how many accomplices are helping him. I'm going to have you and Elza team up to capture him. What do you say?"

Elza would be our bodyguard? Considering the stakes and the danger to Fran's life, having a bodyguard was the best option. Someone of Elza's strength was suitable, since we didn't know who we were dealing with.

"I've thought long and hard about this, and there is no one I trust more than her. You know how capable she is."

He had a point. But having Elza attached to us twenty-four hours a day...

Wh-what do you think, Fran?

"Hm... Elza is perfect."

Yeah, I figured. She didn't have any problems with the big lady; in fact, she was getting more and more comfortable around her.

R-right...of course.

"Hm."

"Very good. I hope you and Elza will cooperate to bring Solus to justice."

Uhh...right! Shouldn't we ask Elza to see what she thinks?

Dias immediately crushed my hopes.

"Not to worry, Teacher. I already cleared it with Elza and she said she would love to."

I see...

"Indeed," said Dias. "Give up."

Damn it, Dias! Don't look at me like that!

"What's wrong, Teacher?"

It's nothing. Let's meet up with Elza and head to Aurel's.

"Hm."

"Be careful on the way there."

"I will."

"Will you really?" Dias asked with a serious look on his face.

Fran answered in kind.

"Hm! Kill Solus."

"Not that! I mean the Beast King!"

I'll take care of that, don't worry.

Here were Fran's current thoughts: kill Solus, fifty percent; evolve, twenty percent; fighting tournament, ten

percent; Beast King, ten percent. While she couldn't help suspect the Beast King of enslaving Black Cats, her hatred of Solus overrode it. She couldn't help but be occupied with finding Inina's killer.

"Are you sure?" asked Dias. "If anything happens to Fran, Lady Lumina's going to kill me!"

And this is part of your deal with her?

"Yes. I vowed that I would protect the Black Cats that came to this city as much as I could. She must've taken a real liking to Fran if she asked you to send me a message. If the Beast King did anything to Fran... I'm getting ulcers just thinking about it."

I knew well enough that a run-in with the Beast King would prove dangerous for Fran. I had to keep a lookout.

Leave it to me.

"Hm. Don't worry."

"I'm begging you here, all right?"

Dias clasped his hands together as Fran left the room.

Let's go meet up with Elza.

"Hm."

"Do be careful out there! And take care of Elza for me!"

Shut up, Dias.

Now that we had finished our business at the guild, we had one more stop to make before heading to Aurel's mansion: the dwarf smith, who was also Garrus's acquaintance.

"I'll stand watch here."

"Hm. Sure."

Elza waited outside while we went into the smithy. I didn't think Solus would dare attack with her around, though I guessed the same could be said for any customers the smithy would've had for the day...

"Hello again, friend of Garrus," said the smith. "What can I do you for today?"

"Equipment maintenance."

We had been making do with the Black Cat set's self-repair skill, but the battle with the pillbug proved too much. Hours later, the armor still had dents and fractures that weren't fixing themselves. Besides, we had never run maintenance on this armor before. With the tournament just around the corner, it needed to be in tip-top shape.

"Zeld, Ulmutt's greatest blacksmith, at your service! You sure put this thing through the rungs though."

Zeld briefly examined the armor before drawing a magic circle and setting some crystals around it. His Repair skill took care of the rest, fixing the set instantly. It cost 100,000 Gold, but it was well worth the peace of mind.

"That takes care of your armor. Now, show me your sword."

"Hm?"

"I mean, if the self-repairing gear got that beat up, your sword's probably no better."

It was a fair assumption, but I had Self-Repair as well as Regeneration, so I wasn't running into any problems. Still, Fran unsheathed me anyway and handed me over to Zeld.

"Take care of it."

F-Fran?! I'm fine, really.

Maybe, but you're still better off having a specialist examine you.

Fran didn't really know what to look for, so Zeld's statement probably worried her.

Well...sure, I guess.

Fran was right. Having a pro look me over wasn't a bad thing. Maybe he could spot some problems I never knew I had.

"Hmmm... Strange metal your sword's made of."

Zeld turned me over and examined me. He then put me on his anvil and began whacking away. The hammer reverberated with the same frequency as my blade, but the feeling wasn't unpleasant. Maybe it was because he was a professional. It was really quite comfortable. Then he dipped me in a box full of water and moved me around. Finally, he wiped me down with a bit of cloth.

It felt so nice I almost moaned in pleasure. I held it in though. I wasn't particularly worried about Zeld discovering that I could talk. No, my reason was far pettier than that. The thirty-something-year-old inside me would die at the thought of feeling so good from a ripped old man's rubdown. Not in the sexual sense, mind you, but in the sense of a comfortable massage. It wasn't a big deal, but a stubborn part of me resisted.

Fran noticed that I was somehow gritting my teeth throughout the ordeal.

Teacher, what's wrong?

N-nothing.

Are you sure? You're acting weird...

I explained my situation to make Fran stop worrying.

So...that's the thing.

I see.

Sorry for worrying you over nothing, Fran. Maintenance felt really nice though. I had Fran clean me up from time-to-time, but it never felt this good. Zeld's Blacksmith skill made a world of difference. Fran's amateur hands just couldn't match up.

"All done. I didn't see any chips or cracks so all it needed was a good straighten and clean."

Maintenance really hit the spot. I felt refreshed for the first time since I came to this world. It was as if I spent the first half of my day at a spa, then loosened up any remaining tension with a deep massage. If I was at a hundred percent before, I was at 120 percent now. Mentally at least. I think my mana and skill functions were working a little better too. Could just be my imagination, though.

"Hm. Good job, blacksmith."

"Gahaha. You're welcome."

Fran couldn't help complementing the blacksmith as she admired my sparkling blade with her sparkling eyes. That felt really nice. I might give regular maintenance a go in the future. Sure, it was mostly in my head, but I needed to be at the top of my mental game to be of use to Fran.

"I'm back."

"Did you get it all fixed up? So adorable!"

Fran tilted her head at Elza's compliment. She didn't know what the word adorable was supposed to mean.

"And you're so cute too..." Elza's Aesthetics skill allowed her to see the beauty not only in herself, but in others as well. She shook her head at her wasted potential. "Anyway, shall we go to Aurel's?"

"Hm."

As much as we wanted to look around the rest of the town, we had a quest to report back on. We decided to eat

on the way to the mansion.

This town sure makes use of its two dungeons. Look at all this monster meat they sell in the stalls.

Monster meat was a luxury in Bulbola, but here it was as common as pork skewers. The variety wasn't lacking either.

"Hm. Tasty."

"Woof."

Elza told us that most of the monster meat came from the beginner-friendly West Dungeon, as part of the agreement with the Dungeon Master. Safety wasn't the only benefit of Ulmutt's relationship with Lumina.

"Ten skewers, please."

"Comin' right up!"

"Five plates."

"Can ya stand to eat all that?" asked the vendor. "Well, I guess Elza's with you. In that case, five plates won't be enough!"

"No problem."

They had all kinds of monster meat: pork, beef, fish, reptile, even insects. Fran didn't care which one she ate. As soon as she gulped down her food, she bought more. Ulmutt food was delicious, both in the quality of its ingredients and seasoning. Despite Fran's indiscriminate eating, I could tell when she was eating a bug.

Fran, let's not order bugs from now on.

Why not? They're good.

You're...giving Elza a hard time.

Elza backed off every time Fran ordered a platter of bugs. Just watching her eat it was enough to make her gag.

Which was fair enough. Even I thought there was something unsettling about eating deep-fried beetle legs like french fries, and this was coming from a sword who had no problems with insects. Little wonder then that Elza was deathly pale and looked like she was about to lose her lunch.

We made it out of the business district and were almost at Aurel's mansion. Its high gates welcomed us, although it didn't look we would be able to enter so soon.

"There are so many people here."

"Woof."

There was a crowd gathered in front of the gates. At least ten people, most of them squatting down. Adventurers probably, but what were they doing here? They looked like a bunch of delinquents loitering in front of a supermarket.

The group seemed to be centered around a man and a girl who were dressed slightly better. Were they the leaders? I didn't know how old the guy was, but the girl couldn't be older than eighteen.

She was just standing there with her arms folded, looking like she was waiting for something. She was a beastman. A cat-type too. So were the rest of the band.

Hrmph.

Fran took one look at them and frowned.

What is it Fran?

Blue Cats.

Wait, all of them?

Hm.

No wonder she looked so sour. Blue Cats were notorious slavers who had a habit of selling Black Cats. Sometimes legally, but mostly otherwise. They were her natural enemies.

Let's be careful.

Woof!

I didn't think they would have the nerve to attack us in public, but you never knew. They looked like they wanted to see Aurel right away. He was the beastman representative in town, however, so I didn't think they would force their way in.

Fran, whatever they say, just ignore them. We need to see Aurel.

Fine.

I was still worried, but I got Fran to agree at least. If things went south, I would teleport us right into the mansion. Aurel seemed to like Fran, and I was sure Elza could clear up any misunderstandings with the guards.

"What is going on?" Elza asked. "I've never seen these people in town before."

"Blue Cats."

"Really? We better stay out of their way then." Elza knew the feud between the two beast tribes. "I'll take point, honey. You stay close to me, okay?"

"Hm."

"Very slowly now."

Elza took the lead and we slowly made our way to the gate. They both used Stealth and Conceal Presence to make sure they didn't alert the mob. The Blue Cats really weren't that strong, since none of them took notice. We should be fine as long as we kept our distance.

Passing through the gates was the real problem, since we needed to talk to the gatekeeper. I doubted that we would escape the mob's notice once we were standing right in front of them. Everything should go smoothly as long as

we ignored whatever they had to say. Still, that was a very big ask.

“Hello.”

“Huh? Lady Elza and...Lady Fran? When did you get here...?”

“We have business with the old man. May we come in?”
Elza worked her usual magic.

“Oh! Yes, of course! Please, go on ahead.”

“Hm. Thanks.”

“Welcome to you both.”

The gates were opened for Fran to go in, and that was when the Blue Cat mob leaders spoke up.

“Hey, hang on!”

“Yeah! What is the meaning of this!”

“Hm?”

The frustrated mob were absolutely furious as they closed in on the gatekeeper.

“We came all the way here to greet the master of this mansion and you’re letting this no-name in without so much as a question?”

“We’ve been waiting all day!”

“As I mentioned earlier, the master will not meet anyone without an appointment. If you leave your name, I can tell the master that you wish to see him as soon as he is available.”

“We are Blue Pride, the greatest mercenary band in the land of Chrome!”

Their name practically told me you had to be a Blue Cat to be a member. Not the kind of people you wanted to get mixed up with.

“Can’t say I’ve heard of you.”

“Ugh... This is the problem with these backwater towns!”

Chrome was the continent next to ours. It lay to the west of Jillbird, where we were. What would a bunch of mercenaries from way out there be doing here? The fighting tournament maybe? Not that they had any chance of winning.

The girl raised her voice to try to intimidate the unimpressed gatekeeper.

“/ am our leader’s representative. Making *me* wait is the same as making our leader wait. Do you understand?”

They might be a notorious mercenary band in Chrome. The girl sure acted like she belonged to one. Thing was, we weren’t in Chrome in right now.

“It matters not. I’ve never heard of this mercenary band of yours.”

The gatekeeper’s blunt dismissal only infuriated the mob further. Their veins looked like they were about to pop right beneath their skin. Still, the way they bragged was a bit shameless. And getting so worked up over not being recognized by a gatekeeper? That was embarrassing to watch.

“You let a mere Black Cat in while ignoring *us*? Have you lost your mind?”

Blue Pride showed up without an appointment, and were all but banging the gates, begging to be let in. I didn’t have Royal Etiquette equipped, but they seemed like a rude bunch to me. They must think they were privileged enough to drop in whenever they wanted.

Fran was barely containing her anger, and their act was getting on Elza’s nerves as well.

"These two are the master's honored guests."

"What? That Black Cat?"

"You would place a Black Cat over us?"

"If I may repeat myself, it doesn't matter. Race is such a trifling thing."

"You said earlier that you represented your leader. Well, this lady is an honored guest of our master. Insulting her is no different than insulting him."

"But she's a Black Cat!"

What is the problem with these Blue Cats? Every single Blue Cat we'd met never failed to look down on Fran. They saw Black Cats as inherently inferior.

Come on, Fran.

...

Ah, crap. Fran was about to lose it. She didn't show it, but a few more words would be reason enough to slaughter this entire mob.

Jet, push Fran inside!

"Woof."

"Hrmph..."

I held her back with Telekinesis while Jet diligently pushed her onward. We got her inside, but Fran glared at the girl the entire time. The girl glared back.

We're leaving, Fran!

"Woof woof!"

Our desperate pleas got through at last. Fran nodded reluctantly and quietly. She understood that turning Aurel's gates into a battlefield was a bad idea. But Fran wasn't going to let the insult to her tribe go unnoticed. She turned

to face the mob of Blue Cats outside the gates, and activated Menace with all her might.

“Eek...!”

“Hurk...!”

The girl paled and fell on her rear while the man instinctively stepped back. The rest of the mob jumped and stared at Fran in fear. All the Blue Cats felt the weight of her terror. At least these mercenaries were competent enough to tell the difference in power between them.

“Wh-what—”

“Hmph.”

Fran sneered at the Blue Cat girl who was now gasping for air. The girl noticed that she had just been played. Fran turned around and coolly walked back through the gate.

Well, don't we look smug...

“Heh.”

That wasn't a compliment.

“Hm?”

“Oh, you're such a bad girl,” Elza scolded, but she was smiling, clearly glad to see the Blue Cats get their comeuppance. We just needed to walk to the mansion, see Aurel, and—

“H-hold it right there!”

And of course, the girl got up to complain. She was tougher than she looked. She was already on her feet and sprinting toward Fran.

“Stop! No trespassing!”

“Shut up and get out of the way! Do you want to get hurt too?!”

“You lot! Don't let her get away!”

With the girl leading the charge, the rest of the mob soon recovered their strength. I'd thought they were just there for moral support, but put together, they made a competent fighting force.

"We won't let that Black Cat runt get away with looking down on us!"

"That's right!"

"Kill her!"

They were ashamed to have been so afraid. They wanted to wipe it away by striking back. What little fear was left from Fran's Menace was converted into anger. Busting through the gates wouldn't have crossed their minds earlier, but they were long past clear thinking. The Blue Cats drew their weapons and rushed forward.

This might end poorly. As strong as Aurel's gatekeepers were, the angry mob vastly outnumbered them. If they died here, their blood would be on Fran's hands, even indirectly.

That was when Elza stepped in.

"You leave this one to me, honey."

She patted Fran on the shoulder and stood between her and the Blue Cats like a wall, blocking both parties' line of sight. The less they saw of each other, the better.

"That is as far as you go. Your shameful behavior is bad enough. You don't want to be criminals, too, do you?"

Elza wasn't using any intimidation skills. In fact, she had on her nicest face. But the Blue Cats looked terrified, although it was a different kind of terror from what Fran inflicted on them earlier. They weren't afraid of Elza's power as much as her unpredictability. The Blue Cat girl was in utter shock as she laid eyes on this mysterious person.

"What is this...*thing*...?"

“Y-yo, this dude’s talkin’ like a lady!”

“St-stay away!”

Wow, these guys were really good at pissing people off.

“Eek!”

Elza glared at the Blue Cat mob with unbridled fury.

“You little stinkers are in for it now...”

A riot ensued, but Elza was at the center of it this time. Unsurprisingly, even twenty Blue Cats were no match for her.

Blue Pride bragged about being a great mercenary band in Chrome, but they sure didn’t coordinate their attacks like one. Maybe the only thing they were notorious for was being incredibly weak or playing dirty. It would certainly explain why they came to this land, where they could claim that they were a powerful band of mercenaries and no one could prove otherwise. It was like when a boring junior high student entered a new school and dyed their hair. Blue Pride did the same thing, albeit on a continental level.

They were running a pretty good racket too. If only they hadn’t pissed off Elza...

May they rest in peace, I thought.

What?

Nothing. Let’s go see Aurel.

“Hm.”

We’ll let Elza dole out their punishment.

“All right...” Fran said with great reluctance. She was still staring at the gates.

Jet!

“Bark bark!” At my command, Jet nudged Fran forward with his muzzle.

“Hrmph.”

Come on!

“Eaaaagh!”

“Yaaaargh!”

We left the screaming Blue Cats to Elza’s mercy, and walked toward Aurel’s mansion.

A few minutes later.

“Hey, you’re here.”

“Hm.”

We passed through the garden and the doors, and the maid led us to Aurel’s dining room. It was furnished with a long dining table, befitting an aristocrat. The old beastman was seated at its head.

“Sorry for the formalities. I’ve been seeing foreign dignitaries and nobles all morning.”

“That’s all right.”

“You want some food, kid? Our chef just got back from Bulbola the other day. I think he learned a few tricks there.”

Aurel’s private chef was a true professional. Fran wasn’t about to refuse.

“Please,” Fran answered, taking a seat next to Aurel.

“Shalla, an extra serving for the young lady.”

“Right away, sir.”

Night had almost fallen on Ulmutt, but this was Aurel’s first meal of the day. The tournament brought many guests

to the city. It was, without a doubt, his busiest time of the year.

"There were some weirdos outside," Fran said.

"So I heard. Some mercenary band."

"Are they famous?"

"Never heard of 'em in my life. And believe me, I have connections over in Chrome. Probably came to see if they could make a name for themselves here."

The self-proclaimed notorious mercenary band was just that: self-proclaimed.

"We get a lot of that. 'I killed a legendary monster in a far off country'; 'I'm the son of a famous noble in a distant land.' The lengths some people go to. I just need to look at them to know that they're weak. You'd think they'd give that whole scam a rest. If you were really strong, you wouldn't run your mouth."

"The Blue Cat mercenaries were all weak."

"Gahaha. Toldja! But who knows, maybe they're famous because of one member, or maybe they're just notorious hacks."

"Hm."

"Either way, I didn't like their attitude," said Aurel.
"And sending in a representative? What kind of aristocrat does their leader take himself for? Just leave 'em be. They'll wear themselves out eventually."

Elza was already dishing out their just desserts. They would probably be gone by the time we finished talking.
Start by telling him that you finished his quest.

"Here, Aurel."

Fran put the pendant on the table.

"Hmm... Anything inside...?"

Aurel opened the pendant to check that the letter had been delivered.

"Tell me about evolution," Fran said.

"So I take it you gave the pendant to Lady Lumina."

"Hm."

Fran nodded, eliciting a warm smile from his stern face.

"Very good. Now, for your reward."

"Don't need any. You just wanted me to meet her, didn't you?"

"That obvious?"

I knew it. Aurel planned Fran's encounter with Lumina under the guise of a quest. But his motive was still a mystery.

"To be clear, I wasn't being nice. Sending promising Black Cats to Lumina works out in this town's favor. Take the reward."

"I don't need it if you'll just talk to me about evolution."

"I don't have any information that's worth your payment."

"Really?"

"I wouldn't have put you through the trouble of meeting Lumina if I did. Would've told you soon as I saw you. I've been researching Black Cat evolution for years, not that I got much out of it. All I can tell you is that there is another requirement aside from reaching your level cap."

Despite Aurel's long life, as both a B-Rank adventurer and a person of power, he failed to dig up answers to this great mystery. But why go through the trouble? Did it have something to do with Lumina? Or was it because of the adventurer known only as the Black Cat?

“Then tell me about the adventurer called Black Cat,” Fran asked.

Aurel knitted his eyebrows.

“Who...told you?”

“Radule.”

“That motormouth wizard!”

Aurel looked very annoyed.

“Please? I heard she was really strong.”

“Urgh... Do you really have to know?”

“Hm.”

“Right...”

Fran stared at the older man as he shook his head. He couldn't refuse a request from his newfound granddaughter-figure. Or perhaps he saw Fran as another “Black Cat.”

“It was fifty-three years ago—” Aurel began quietly.

He met a female Black Cat adventurer, and she had saved his life. Afterward, he helped her look for a way to evolve. Aurel had been reluctant to start telling the story, but as he reminisced, he couldn't help feeling nostalgic.

“Black Cat discrimination was even worse back then, but that didn't stop her from wanting to evolve.”

“She couldn't in the end?”

“No. And that was despite frequent meetings with Lumina.”

“Even then?”

“Probably not.”

Probably? That was a vague way of putting it. Fran tilted her head.

“Some stuff happened after that. She had to leave town. I haven’t heard a peep from her ever since.”

“What happened?”

“You know... Stuff. In any case, she’s no longer here. Look, Dias knew her, why not ask him? Anyway, we’re here to talk about *your* evolution, Fran.”

I didn’t have to use my skills to know that Aurel was lying. I wondered why. Did Black Cat lose her life in a dungeon? If so, no wonder Aurel didn’t want to tell Fran. It would be a painful memory. We might find out more if we talked to Dias, and we didn’t want to sour Aurel’s mood, so we let him drop the subject.

“You’ve probably heard from Lumina that Black Cats used to be able to evolve.”

“So it’s true?”

“Yeah. Lumina might be restricted in what she can say, but I was able to piece together the details. Black Cats were able to evolve like every other beastman until one day they couldn’t. Why is that?”

If we knew, we wouldn’t be asking...but Aurel had worked out a hypothesis.

“I think there is a high possibility that it’s divine retribution.”

Fran tilted her head and put Aurel’s conclusion into her own words.

“So the gods made it happen?”

“Yeah. Wouldn’t be the first time in history someone got punished by the gods for a great offence. Goldicia is the best known example.”

We had heard that story before. The dragon king Trismegistus used the power of the Evil One to create more

and more monsters until eventually the entire continent lay in ruin. Trismegistus was sentenced to fight his own creations for eternity.

“Even if the Black Cat’s inability to evolve happened ages ago, it’s strange that there’s absolutely no information on it. The same thing happened in the Goldicia incident, too, you see. The gods wiped out the memory of how Trismegistus created the monsters.”

The gods of this world had free-reign on the memories of their people.

“The requirements of evolution for each beast tribe is a well-guarded secret, but for there to be little-to-no records of it whatsoever? Hell, even the elves don’t remember a time when Black Cats could evolve.”

Now that definitely raised questions. There should be *some* records, even if evolution stopped hundreds of years ago. The complete absence of evidence was all too suspicious. It lent credence to the possibility that the gods were involved.

We had one question though.

“Little-to-no records?”

Did that mean there were *some* records still lying around?

“There is the one document that makes mention of it.”

“What does it say?”

Fran jumped out of her seat and slammed her fist on the table. Aurel just gave her a wry smile.

“Calm down. It’s not directly related to the Black Cat tribe.”

The document probably lacked details on the specific requirements.

"You ever heard of the Ten Ancestors?" Aurel asked.

"No clue."

"They were the ten original beastmen, born of the Beast God. They were each bestowed with the power of the Godbeast."

"Godbeast? Sounds cool."

Whatever this Godbeast was, it sounded powerful.

"Among the Ten Ancestors, only nine of them are currently known: Golden Fire Lion, White Snow Wolf, Yellow Dust Rat, Purple Wind Elephant, Orange Iron Fox, Red Earth Horse, Blue Water Dragon, Azure Life Snake, Cherry Blossom Ox. For the longest time, beastmen wondered about the identity of the Tenth Ancestor..."

"And you're saying they were a Black Cat?"

"Might be. The document I found says that the Tenth is called the Black Sky Tiger. Lady Lumina is a Black Tiger, so..."

"So Black Tigers are the same as Black Sky Tigers?"

Aurel shook his head.

"No. They're alike, but they're not the same."

"?"

"Take me for example. I'm an evolved White Dog called the White Wolf."

"Hm."

"However, if I had completed the necessary requirements at the time of my evolution, I would've become a White Snow Wolf instead. As it stands, I only made it to the White Wolf stage."

Aurel explained that the White Dog tribe were the descendants of one of the Ten, namely the White Snow Wolf.

There was a way to achieve the glory of the original White Snow Wolf, as long as you fulfilled some special requirement. By that logic, a Black Cat could evolve into either a Black Sky Tiger, or a Black Tiger like Lumina.

Even today, the White Dogs were still revered for being descendants of one of the Ten.

“Don’t you think it’s strange that people could so easily forget that Black Cats might be the descendants of the missing Tenth Ancestor?”

“Hm.”

Many beastmen tribes studied the Tenth Ancestor, and not few of them claimed to be their direct descendants. Unfounded claims, really. I doubted Aurel would take the account of the Black Sky Tiger so seriously if he hadn’t known of Lumina’s existence. She more than confirmed that Black Cats were the descendants of the Black Sky Tiger.

So the Black Cats used to be among the Ten, but were punished by the gods and had their memories wiped? If that were the case, why did the gods allow Aurel to find that one document...?

“And that’s all I know...” Aurel muttered with deep regret.

It was impressive that he’d found any information at all, considering the gods literally wiped a chunk of history from memory. Regardless, it was still bad news for Fran. A cloud hung over her head now.

“Divine retribution... So the Black Cats did something bad?”

Simple training wasn’t going to help her evolve if that were the case.

“In all likelihood, yeah.”

“Oh... I guess there’s no way for me to evolve.”

“No, you still can!”

Aurel cut Fran off before she fell into despair.

“The wrath of the gods can be quenched. Even Trismegistus’s curse would be lifted if he managed to kill all the monsters he created. Similarly, there has to be a way to lift the curse placed on the Black Cats.”

He wasn’t trying to lift her spirits; Aurel was speaking in concrete terms. Despite not belonging to the Black Cats, the outcast tribe held a special place in his heart.

“Not that I know what the requirements are... Sorry I can’t be of much help.”

“That’s okay. I learned a lot already. Thanks.”

“Yeah? That’s a relief.”

Aurel smirked. He looked lighter. For a moment he wasn’t the representative of the beastmen of Ulmutt, but an old man with the weight of a long life on his mind.

“...”

Silence fell on the dining room. Neither of them felt like making small-talk. The air got heavier and heavier until the tension was finally broken by the sound of a food cart. Shala was here with lunch.

“Lunch is served, master.”

“Hey, about time.”

Aurel smiled, relieved that his maid had broken the tension. A well-built man was standing next to Shala. He was probably Aurel’s personal chef.

“I apologize for the long wait.”

“Smells good, Asto.”

“It’s the latest recipe I acquired in Bulbola.”

Asto lifted the lid off the pot and began stirring. Was it some kind of soup? The aroma alone was enough to pique Aurel's interest, but the gleam in Fran's eyes told me all I needed to know.

"Well now I can't wait."

"Admittedly," said Asto, "this is still a test batch."

"You're going to serve your master a test batch? Come on now, Asto."

"You have a sensitive tongue, master. I wish to ask for your assistance. The dish I tasted in Bulbola was otherworldly."

Asto had a longing look on his face as he remembered it.

"It must be delicious if you're willing to vouch for it."

"As delicious as my batch is, it's lacking...something. I would appreciate your feedback."

"So I get to criticize you *and* get good food?" said Aurel. "You can count on me!"

"But seeing as you have a guest, I suppose I should go cook her something more standard."

"What do you say, kid?"

"Hm. I'm fine."

"Then I request your feedback as well," said Asto.

"You got it."

"Arf, arf!"

Not wanting to miss out, Jet started barking to draw attention to himself. *Stop drooling, boy! What if you damage the carpets?!*

"Jet wants some too."

"The flavors might be too intense for your dog..."

“He’s a monster, he’ll be fine.”

“Woof!”

“Aaah, so he is your familiar? I’ve never seen such a friendly monster. I will prepare a plate for your pupper.”

Asto took a deep dish, scooped the brown liquid out of the pot and lay it on a bed of white grains. The oozing brown liquid contained potatoes and other vegetables. It looked familiar, but then again, of course it did. This was the dish I popularized back in Bulbola.

“Is this curry?”

“You’ve heard of it, young lady? Yes, this is curry. The latest winner of Bulbola’s esteemed cooking contest!”

No wonder Fran got so excited over a whiff of the stuff.

“Speaking of, were you at Bulbola, Fran?”

“Hm.”

“Then you’ve had this dish before?”

“Hm.”

“Wonderful!”

Had it? Fran had curry practically every day. Still, Fran and Jet’s eyes gleamed as they stared at it. Even I was interested to see how people had interpreted the dish.

“Please, dig in.”

“It looks funky. But it does smell nice.”

“Munch munch.”

“Scarf scarf.”

Aurel’s nose twitched as he sniffed it, but Fran was already digging in.

“You have a fantastic appetite, young lady.”

Reassured by the younger beastman, Aurel shrugged and put the spoonful in his mouth.

"Hmm... It tastes strange...but I'm going back for more!"

Aurel liked it. He started his meal slowly, but gradually picked up speed.

"More."

"Woof."

By the time Aurel finished his portion, Fran and Jet were already on their third plate.

Is it that good?

It's all right, I guess.

She wasn't satisfied with the curry, despite going back for thirds.

It's good. But it's nowhere close to your curry, Fran explained.

"This is really good. What's it called again?"

"This dish is called curry, and it is all the rage in Bulbola at the moment. There's curry bread, curry pasta, and countless other interpretations. Practically every restaurant in Bulbola has some version of it."

"I can see why. And you're saying this isn't the definitive version?"

"Yes. This is nothing compared to the original I ate in Bulbola."

"That good, huh?"

"The contest was canceled due to the incident this year, but the people said that this recipe would've won."

"Hm! Of course."

Fran nodded. We couldn't win, but she was happy that curry had won the people's approval. The chefs of Bulbola went further with the dish than I imagined. Curry pasta? I wanted to try some of that.

"You sound real happy, kid."

"Because Teacher made it."

"Teacher? Whose?"

"Are you talking about the elusive Curry Teacher?"

Sorry, Asto, what did you just say? Curry Teacher? Was that what people called me?

"So your cooking teacher's the one who made curry, Fran?"

"He's not just my cooking teacher. He knows everything."

"So he taught you swordplay and spells too?"

"Hm. Teacher can do it all."

"Sounds like one hell of a guy. I'm surprised he isn't with you."

"Teacher can be everywhere and nowhere."

"Well, if you're his student, I can't imagine how strong he must be. Probably runs solo just like you."

"Wait, so you are the Curry Teacher's student?" Asto asked.

I guess my ears weren't fooling me after all. Who gave me such a stupid nickname?!

Fran, ask him if I'm the Curry Teacher he's talking about.

I really needed to know.

"Asto, who is the Curry Teacher?"

"I thought he was your teacher," said Aurel.

"We don't actually know the real name of the one who created the curry recipe. He only went by the name Teacher, and eventually someone affixed Curry to it. I just happened to meet some adventurers who received the recipe straight from Curry Teacher himself."

"Adventurers?"

"Yes, a party called Crimson Maidens. Do you know them?"

I knew it. They were the girls we hired to help us sell curry bread during the contest. They must've named me Curry Teacher because Fran told them that "Teacher made the curry." I was willing to bet that Lydia, the girl with the smile that never faltered, thought it up.

"So? What do you think of the curry?"

"Hm. It's okay."

"I see... But I won't give up. A perfect dish isn't made in one night. I'll make it even better next time!"

"Hm. Good luck. I'll taste it for you any time."

"Thank you so much, young lady!"

You don't have to thank her, Asto. Fran just wanted free food.

After finishing several plates, Aurel warned Fran about the Beast King just like Dias had. He was dangerous enough to put Aurel, a fellow beastman, on guard.

"Thanks."

"Sure. You come by any time."

"Hm."

By the time we left Aurel's mansion, the gates were completely free of Blue Cats. They must've given up and left. Elza and the gatekeepers were laughing with each other.

"Frannie, you're back. Are you done with Aurel?"

"How'd it go Elza?"

"Were you worried about me? Oh, you didn't have to! I could've taken care of those punks with my eyes closed."

I figured. There wasn't a scratch on either Elza or the gatekeepers, so I could guess how easy the battle must've been.

"All they needed was a little bit of discipline to teach them manners."

In fact, I felt a little sorry for the Blue Cats. Even though they brought their destruction upon themselves.

What should we do now, Teacher?

I want to hear Dias's side of the story. What happened fifty-three years ago with the girl called Black Cat?

"Hm."

We made our way to the Adventurer's Guild once more. I hoped Dias would still be there.

"I'll go see if the Guildmaster is in!"

"Ah—"

Elza ran ahead to the guildhouse. She didn't have to do that, but she was no longer within shouting distance by the time Fran opened her mouth. But I felt an unspeakable strangeness coming from the entrance to the guild. I didn't know what it was, only that it made me restless.

What...is going on?

What is it, Teacher?

I dunno... Huh?

I looked around for the source of the unease. Then, I spotted something.

Where'd that door come from?

"Door? What?"

"Woof?"

There was a door in front of the guild. It was a large, wooden double door which had somehow appeared in the middle of the street. It looked like it'd sprouted right out of the ground.

Click.

Not knowing what to make of it, we could only stare as the door swung open. And then it happened. An intense presence came surging through, and we dropped into our battle stance. We couldn't help ourselves, the pressure was overwhelming.

Urgh!

"Hm!"

"Grr!"

Immense pressure assaulted us from beyond the door. It wasn't murderous, but it announced a far superior strength. It was impossible not to feel it. Fran's ears and tail stood on end, along with the rest of the hairs on her body.

As the door opened further, I caught a glimpse of a furnished room beyond it. This wasn't your regular sort of door.

"After you, Lord Rig."

"Thanks."

People were stepping out now. The first was a small man, and likely a mage. He held the door open for the

person behind him—an aide probably. A large man stepped out of the door next, with golden hair like a lion's mane. He looked distinguished, and was built more powerfully than even Elza. Despite his towering height, his movements had a graceful feline quality about them. The man's silence was enough to intimidate. He had the presence of a lion, the king of the beasts.



I Identified him. I couldn't help myself; it was pretty much habit.

Name: Rigdith Nalasincha

Age: 38

Race: Red Cat/Golden Fire Lion.

Class: Dragoon

Level: 71/99

HP: 1965; Magic: 1081; Strength: 1084; Agility: 749

Skills: Sensitive Sole 8; Intimidate 10; Stealth 3; Brute Strength 6; Flame Magic 7; Camouflage 3; Frenzy 8; Presence Sense 8; Breath Control—Harden 7; Torture 2; Brute Force 10; Fangclaw Arts 7; Fangclaw Mastery 8; Regeneration 8; Command 3; Raise Morale 6; Abnormal Status Resistance 7; Flexibility 6; Blink 10; Flash Step 5; Mental Status Resistance 5; Elemental Blade 10; Threaten 3; Breath Control—Softening 8; Vigor 8; Fire Magic 10; Roar 8; Magic Resistance 5; Mana Sense 4; Mana Barrier 8; Flame Immunity; Spirit Control; Mind's Eye; Enhanced Spear Arts; Enhanced Spear Mastery; Enhanced Elemental Blade; Enhanced Fur; Hardened Fur; Demon Killer; Dragon Slayer; Determination; Sense of Balance; Predator; Mana Manipulation; Night Vision

Unique Skill: Flame Drain; Dragoon Arts; Dragoon Mastery; Spear God's Blessing

Extra Skill: Beast God's Favor

Class Skill: Awaken; Golden Flame of Extinction; Spear God Form

Titles: Kingslayer; Patricide; Usurper; Beast King; Beast God's Favorite; Dragoon; Dungeon Conqueror; Demon Killer; Dragon Slayer; Fire Mage; S-Rank Adventurer

Equipment: Flame Dragon Fang Lance; Flame Dragon Scale Armor; Venomlord Snake Tights; Golden Flame Lion Cloak; Bracelet of Sacrifice; Ring of Reason; Beast King Seal

...!

What the hell was this thing?! HP, Strength, and Magic, all over 1,000?! This guy made Amanda and Dias look cute! He was a frontline fighter, but he would make a formidable caster too. I'd never seen most of his skills before, and he had a lot of Extra and Class Skills to boot.

However, his most alarming titles were Beast King and S-Rank Adventurer. He reigned over all the beast tribes. As befitting of his title, he was terrifyingly strong, and carried himself with an air of nobility.

Does he not have any weaknesses...?!

Before I could read up on his many skills, a figure blocked my line of sight. Another giant beastman, larger even than the Beast King himself. This man was as tall as he was wide.

"What's the matter, girl?"

The giant looked as if he would win a test of strength with a Stone Golem. I had seen him once before. This was Gaudartha, the guardian of the carriage we saw this afternoon. For a second, I thought he had sensed someone Identifying his master. Thankfully, that wasn't the case. We just happened to be in the Beast King's way. We had to get out of here before we drew any more attention.

Fran, we have to get out of here. Now!

...

Fran? Are you okay?

...

But Fran didn't respond. She only shook, growing paler and paler.

So strong... We can't win...

I had never seen Fran so terrified. This wasn't her first time meeting an Evolved—she had been very blunt with Aurel and Lumina, but now she was petrified. The Beast King had succeeded in achieving the power of the Ten Ancestors. The pressure he gave off was ridiculous. A trace of murderous intent probably would've been enough to kill a man with a weak heart. And Fran was strong enough to realize the unspannable chasm of power between them. Her beastman instincts were screaming that she was little more than prey.

"What's this? Hey, kid, you a Black Cat?"

The Beast King noticed Fran and stared right at her.

"Black Cat adventurers are far and few in between."

"Indeed. She's quite strong, for what it's worth."

Gaudartha examined Fran again, his interest piqued by his master's comments. It didn't take long for him to gauge Fran's abilities.

"Yeah? Well, she ain't worth much."

"You can't judge her by your standards, Lord Rig."

"Why not? Well, whatever. Say, that sword of yours look strong. How about I grant you a royal audience right here and now?"

Crap, he had his eyes on us! I could feel the Beast King's battle urge rising. His eyes took on the look of a lion who had spotted its prey. Fran was still petrified, her will completely broken by the overwhelming pressure.

He's going...to kill me...

Arf...

Even Jet was cowering in the shadows. Fran could do nothing but tremble. I might have to use some Dimension Magic to get out of here. It might leave an even bigger mess for us to clean up later...but Fran's safety took priority.

"You don't have time for that, Master Rig."

"Damn it, Royce."

The aide who'd opened the door spoke up. Unlike the easy-going Gaudartha, the man called Royce was of a sharper attitude. He waved his hand over the door and it disappeared. The door was some kind of skill, or maybe manatech stored away with something like Pocket Dimension. I decided to Identify him. My Identification of the Beast King went unnoticed, so none of these guys had Identify Sense. We might end up fighting them one day, so I wasn't going to let this opportunity slip away. If I got caught, we'd just skip town. I'd apologize to Fran for making her miss the fighting tournament, but it was better than getting killed.

Name: Royce

Age: 46

Race: Gray Rabbit/White Silver Rabbit.

Class: Space Mage

Level: 74

HP: 401; Magic: 1199; Strength: 151; Agility: 419

Skills: Sensitive Sole 4; Dig 4; Sound Sense 6; Stealth 2; Healing Magic 8; Moonlight Magic 4; Presence Sense 7; Conceal Presence 4; Timespace Magic 4; Kick Arts 5; Kick Mastery 7; Blink 7; Abnormal Status Resistance 4; Vibration Sense 3; Mental Status Resistance 7; Staff Arts 5; Staff Mastery 6; Land Magic 3; Jump 4; Earth Magic 10; Support Magic 5; Magic Resistance 8; Mana Sense 4; Mana Control; Orc Killer; Goblin Killer; Mana Regeneration; Enhanced Hearing

Class Skill: Awaken; Dimension Door; Crescent Moon Seal

Titles: Orc Killer; Goblin Killer; Protector; Dungeon Conqueror; Earth Mage; A-Rank Adventurer

Equipment: Silver Moonstone Longstaff; Crescent Rabbit Robe; Earth Sprite Cloak; Decoy Bracelet; Vampire Ring

This guy was a monster too! An evolved beastman with over 1,000 Magic. Despite Royce's rabbit ancestry, cute was the last word you would use to describe him. That said, his powerful legs and kicking proficiency were painfully stereotypical. He also had Timespace Magic along with other rare abilities. Of course he was an A-Rank! A real A-Rank too—unlike Seldio, the fraud we encountered outside the city gates. The door seemed to be a product of his Dimension Door skill.

Three such monsters stood before Fran, each far more powerful than she was. To make matters worse, none of them were exactly friendly. Simply maintaining one's composure before the Beast King's posse was impossible.

Royce seemed to have sensed Fran's distress and addressed the Beast King coolly.

"We must hurry, lest we be late for our meeting with the Guildmaster."

"Oh, right. Almost forgot about that. Hey, good for you, kid. You get to live another day!"

"You sound like a common thug, Lord Rig."

"I'm the King of the Beast Tribes. Of all the kings on earth, I have the most right to act like a mob boss!"

"I was hoping you would stop, sir."

"Oh, shut it! Come on, let's go!"

We were safe, for now. Rigdith lost all interest in Fran and followed his aides into the guildhouse. When they were gone, Fran dropped to her knees. She was on all fours, her breathing completely out of whack.

"Huff, haa, urgh..."

She was going to hyperventilate.

It's okay now, Fran! Calm down! Deep breaths...

"Haaa... Haa...!"

Fran forced herself to breathe deeply. Beads of sweat dripped down her chin. She never stopped trembling, and the sound of nauseated heaves mixed in with her gasps for breath.

Fran, can you hear me?

"Urk... Hm..."

Just barely, by the sound of it. Still, she was able to force a nod, so some of her senses had returned.

Let's go back to the inn. We'll get some rest, then head to the dungeon first thing in the morning. We can talk to Dias after that, okay?

"Hm..."

I teleported us back to the inn. It would've been strange to anyone who saw it, but the sooner we got back, the better. She absolutely needed to rest.

Can you walk?

"I'm fine..."

She moved like she had just fought a life-threatening battle. That one encounter took everything out of her. I helped her get to our room with Telekinesis.

We should get to C-Rank before we run into the Beast King again.

I didn't expect the Beast King to be such a...beast. He was probably emitting that intense presence to prepare for the negotiating war with Dias. As the representatives of the Beast Tribes and Adventurer's Guild, both had to be armed to the teeth.

Fran just got caught in the crossfire. The pressure the Beast King emitted wasn't even directed toward us, yet the terror it inflicted was unreal. None of the monsters we'd fought so far even came close. We had to avoid fighting him at all costs. I would take fighting a dragon over the Beast King. We had to rank up as fast as possible.

An hour later, Fran was finally beginning to calm down.

Shall we call it for today, Fran?

"I'm fine."

She was responsive again, now that she was no longer in the Beast King's presence.

Are you sure? Don't force yourself.

She was still pale, but she wasn't trembling anymore.

All right. Do you want dinner or a bath before you go to bed?

"Hm. I'll take a bath."

Fran enjoyed baths, so it would be a welcome change of pace. While she was at it, I'd normally practice my skills. But today I had something else that needed to be done.

I have to find out where the Beast King is staying.

We could avoid him much more easily if we knew his address. First, I would check the Adventurer's Guild to see if he was still there. If he was, we'd wait until he left and follow. If he wasn't, I would use Jet's nose and my own Presence Sense to pinpoint his location.

Let's go, Jet.

"Woof..."

Don't worry, we're not going there to fight.

"Arf..."

Jet was terrified of the Beast King. Still, we needed to know where he was.

We don't even need to come close to them. We'll just scout them from afar.

"Woof..."

He really didn't want to do this. The encounter really did a number on Jet's courage. Time to implement doggie treats. I shouldn't really, not when I was trying to discipline him. The next time I wanted him to do something, Jet would request even more treats. Still, this was the only way forward.

I'll make you some ultrahot curry when we get back. I'll even make you something Fran's never tried before: Hellfire Curry.

"Grr!"

Well, that did the trick. The fire was burning in Jet's eyes again.

Come on.

“Woof!”

We rushed to the Adventurer’s Guild and sensed that the Beast King was still in the building. I didn’t have to get close to feel his raw aggression—the aura was even worse than this afternoon. He really wanted an upper hand against Dias. As young as the Guildmaster looked, he was still an old man. I hoped the Beast King’s presence hadn’t given him a heart attack.

This negotiation was going to take a long time, but I wanted to get back by the time Fran was finished with her bath, which left me about twenty minutes. Fortunately, the Beast King started moving out of the guildhouse. I focused my attention beyond the rooftops to the Adventurer’s Guild. I could clearly see that the Beast King and his posse were on the move.

Royce threw up another Dimension Door. I was hoping Jet could track his scent.

No need for that now, I guess.

“Woof.”

We could still feel the Beast King’s aura, even after the Dimension Door disappeared. Their hotel was right under our noses. Now that I thought about it, there weren’t many places equipped to host such an esteemed guest. The hostile aura he brandished had faded, but I had no trouble pinpointing his location. Only problem was he picked a spot close to the Adventurer’s Guild. We would have to be careful coming and going there.

Jet, make a note of the Beast King’s scent.

“Woof.”

I made a mental note of his aura, too, so we wouldn’t run into him.

Anyway, let’s head back.

“Bark!”

I teleported us back to the room. We were running a little late, and Fran had already finished her bath. Something was off though. Fran was sitting on the bed, knees pulled up to her chest. There wasn't a single light on.

We're back... Fran?

“Woof.”

Her face was buried in her thighs. She didn't respond.

Why'd you turn the lights off?

“Hm...!”

Whoa!

Fran charged. She gripped us tight and buried her face in Jet's fur.

What's wrong, Fran?

“Woof?”

“Teacher... Jet...”

Her voice was trembling.

What's gotten into you?

“Nothing...” Fran said, although the deep concern on her face betrayed her true emotions.

Her eyes were red and puffy. Had she been crying...?

“Arf?”

“Hm. That tickles.”

Jet licked her cheeks, and finally a smile returned to her lips. Fran might act like she was okay, but no one could survive an encounter with a monster like the Beast King unscathed. Her broken will wasn't going to be fixed in a matter of minutes. She only put on a strong face so she wouldn't worry me.

I'm such an idiot...

Her tears were on my hands. I could've scouted the Beast King's location at any time. In my panic, I wanted to get a handle on his movements as soon as possible. But Fran needed me today.

I'm sorry.

I used Telekinesis to pull Fran into an embrace. Times like these, I wish I had a human body again. I could make copies of myself, but they were just that. Copies. My body was a sword and Telekinesis was my hands.

Anything I can do for you tonight?

"Sleep in the same bed with me."

You sure?

"Hm."

I didn't see that one coming. I fully expected her to want a midnight order of curry or pancakes.

But I'm a sword. I'm hard.

"Don't care."

Fran looked me squarely in the crest and nodded. Her mind was made up.

Well, if you say so.

"You, too, Jet."

"Woof?"

And that was how I became Fran's body pillow for the night. I was probably far too stiff to provide any comfort, even with my sheath on. I was still a sword after all. Still, Fran locked her arms and legs around me and refused to let go. Fran was to my right while Jet was to my left in all his furriness.

Fran rubbed her head against my hilt and I wondered if that hurt. Fortunately, the exhaustion caught up to her and she fell asleep quickly, despite having the most uncomfortable body pillow in all the realms. She was usually a deep sleeper, but I thought it came even easier to her tonight.

"Zzz..."

But now I had nothing to do. I usually practiced my skills at this hour, but that would wake Fran up. Might as well spend the night staring at Fran's sleeping face. I never got to do much of that.

Goodnight, Fran.

"Mm..."

Chapter 6: The Will to Carry On

THE NIGHT PASSED on our fateful encounter with the Beast King.

Fran recovered after a good rest. She was still reeling from her chance encounter, but she was doing a lot better than the day before. I told her of our plans as she had breakfast in bed.

We'll head to the East Dungeon today. Let's try to get our rank up as fast as possible.

"Hm. Agreed."

"Woof."

These two experienced the terror of the Beast King firsthand. We could probably handle his bodyguards. That is, we stood a chance of surviving long enough to escape. If we pulled out all the stops. And provided we only fought one at a time. The Beast King was a different matter. I couldn't see any version of reality where we survived. His stats were on a different level, and he had a lot of skills I'd never heard of before. He was also far more experienced than us. He'd kill Fran in a second before breaking me to pieces just for fun.

Rigdith was the last person we wanted to face.

We'll set aside training for today. Focus on quests.

"Hm."

Our goal was to complete all our assigned quests. In the event that we couldn't, we'd try to get them all done by tomorrow. We knew the layout of the dungeon, along with its traps and monster positions. Heading straight to the depths would be our most effective option.

All right, let's get going. Jet, be on the lookout.

"Woof!"

Fran, do your best to blend in.

"Hm. Will do."

We concealed our presence and snuck away to the East Dungeon. No snack stops today. We arrived at the entrance without running into any problems.

Good, doesn't seem like there's a queue.

We were much earlier than the day before, and the reception area was completely empty. We could enter the dungeon faster, and finish the prerequisite quests. But just as we were about to clock in, a voice called out to us.

"Good morning, Frannie!"

It was Elza.

"Where did you run off to yesterday? I was so worried about you."

I was so distracted by the Beast King that I completely forgot about her!

"I waited and waited, but you never came... I don't know where you're staying either. I looked all over for you." We'd missed our appointment with Elza, but she didn't seem angry.

"I'm sorry, Elza."

Still, it was only good manners to apologize.

"What happened? Did you get sick? Upset stomach?"

"I ran into the Beast King outside the guild."

"What?! Y-you just met him? What happened? Did he hurt you?"

Elza's mock heartbreak turned to genuine concern. She checked Fran all over to make sure she was still in one piece,

and despite watching someone of her size and strength patting down a little girl, I felt no need to stop her. Elza was a good person, and I trusted by now that she meant Fran no harm. She really was just worried about her.

Now, if Dias were doing the pat down on the other hand, I'd cut him up without a second thought.

"I'm fine."

"But something must've happened."

"And I'm fine. I was just weak, that's all," Fran said, biting her lip.

Recalling the events of last night made her more angry than afraid. That was good. Angry was better than scared. Fran could use the anger to help her grow, and hopefully she wouldn't break the next time she met the Beast King face-to-face.

"Are you sure you're okay, Fran?"

"Hm."

Elza could clearly tell something had happened. She seemed to have an idea of what it was too.

"Because I'm not," she said. "The pressure of his presence was overkill. I was there when the Guildmaster talked to the Beast King, you know."

"You felt it too?"

"Would've been impossible not to. He emitted so much terror I couldn't look him in the eye. And he was so good looking too! The Guildmaster managed to withstand his murderous aura during the negotiations *and* wring out some concessions in our favor! It's been a long time since I had any respect for that guy."

I was amazed Elza could talk about it so lightly. She and Dias were both pretty impressive, I had to admit. Even

Fran's eyes shone with admiration.

"Good job, Dias."

"He isn't our Guildmaster for nothing. But I'm glad that you're all right, Fran."

"Sorry about yesterday."

"Oh, it's okay. I can't imagine how scared you must've been. I'm surprised to see you up and about already."

"Thanks."

"Are you heading in? How about we—"

"Elza!"

As Fran's bodyguard, Elza probably wanted them to explore the dungeon together. But before she could offer, one of the guards called out with some degree of urgency.

"What is it?"

"Some adventurers are fighting with a noble...and one of them is an A-Rank."

"Ugh, what are they doing...?!"

An A-Rank adventurer? It might be our old friend Seldio and his stooges. With an attitude like that, it was difficult to imagine how they avoided getting into fights on a daily basis.

"They've personally asked for you to settle the matter."

"Me? But I need to protect Fran... Where's the Guildmaster?"

"Still entertaining the Beast King, I'm afraid."

"Gods, I can't believe this!" Elza was tearing her afro apart, probably wishing she could be in two places at once.

"Go on, Elza," Fran said. "I'll be fine."

“But Solus is still at large. It’s dangerous to go alone.” Elza clearly wasn’t just worried about Solus, but also concerned that Fran hadn’t yet fully recovered from the mental damage inflicted by the Beast King.

“I’m not alone.”

“Woof woof!” Jet barked to remind Elza of his existence.

“Of course. Sorry about that, Jet.”

“Bark!”

“We’ll be fine.”

Fran’s firm nod seemed to reassure Elza. “I suppose. I know how strong you are, Frannie.”

“Hm!”

“Well, I’ll be off then.”

Elza began leaving with the guard, but suddenly stopped and turned around.

“Oh, one more thing. Be careful with those mercenaries from the other day. They might be connected to the Beast King.”

“You mean those Blue Cats?”

“That’s them. They operated in Beast Country before, and they said that they had the entire nation’s backing. Could be nothing but lies, but be careful.”

“All right. Thanks.”

“I’ll catch you later, Frannie. Mwah!”

Elza threw Fran a kiss and left. I was getting so used to her that I didn’t even think twice about it this time.

“What’s wrong, Teacher?”

I-It’s nothing. Let’s hurry up and enter the dungeon.

Elza had attracted a lot of attention to us, even after she left. Fran registered herself and entered the dungeon. The air was different from yesterday. There were fewer monsters now, and the ones that did spawn were awfully weak. What happened? Lumina must've manipulated the variables, but I couldn't figure out why.

"These monsters are weak."

At least we can advance a lot easier now.

But there was one problem: The monsters that we needed to complete our quests weren't spawning much. We might have a hard time just spotting them. To make matters worse, the items we needed were rare drops.

We're not getting any materials!

My hunch was right. The monsters we needed weren't spawning often. But we persisted, and eventually we gathered enough. It took a lot of time, but Jet's nose came through in the end.

Good boy, Jet. I'll cook you up some ultrahot chicken tandoori to go with your ultrahot curry!

"Arf arf!"

"I want some too!"

Of course, Fran. I'll make you some regular chicken tandoori.

"Yes."

"Woof!"

At least the lack of monsters allowed us to relax. We couldn't enjoy idle chatter if the spawn rates were the same as last time.

So, Fran, do you know what you want to do with our leftover EP?

"Hm."

I was going to ask her last night, but couldn't. She was probably going to pick Advanced Sword Mastery and Advanced Sword Arts, since those affected her abilities the most. Presence Sense would probably come next. We could use it to predict an enemy's attack in the middle of battle now, since it was nearing its cap. Honorable mentions went to Flame Magic, Thunder Magic, and Elemental Blade.

So I was quite surprised by her choice.

"Blacksmith."

Sorry. Did you say Blacksmith?

I didn't see that coming. Her choice was so out of left field that I had to ask again.

"Hm."

Mind if I ask why? You never really had an interest in it. Don't you want to level up something that'll help you in the tournament?

"Blacksmith's fine." Fran was adamant. "Your maintenance is very important."

That's why you want to level it up? I appreciate the thought, but we can level up something that would be of more use to you.

"Blacksmith would be of use to me."

Fran had made up her mind. As much as I didn't want to waste our hard-earned EP, the fact that Fran would use it for my sake made me tear up.

All right, if you say so.

"Max it out."

You're sure about this?

"Hm!"

And so I invested my EP in Blacksmith. Maxing it out felt weird, but that was the skill Fran wanted.

***Blacksmith is at max level. Acquired skill
Blacksmith Magic 1.***

Being able to perform our own maintenance would come in handy, but I couldn't help but feel that leveling up some combat skills would be more useful. As I lamented my decisions, Fran laid me down on the ground and wiped me with a piece of cloth.

"Hm!"

Uh, Fran? What are you doing?

"Maintenance."

Now?

"Hm."

We were still in a dungeon, Fran! At least, that was what I would've said if not for the sudden rush of pleasure. With a maxed out Blacksmith skill, Fran's mere wipe down was as good as Zeld's full treatment.

Aaah, yeah, that's the spot.

"Hm."

Aaaaah.

I let Fran work her magic for thirty minutes. In a dangerous dungeon. Her maintenance just felt that good. I might ask her to do this for me on a daily basis. What a happy sword I would be. It felt like getting your back massaged.

Oof, I feel refreshed. Thanks, Fran.

"I can keep going."

You will? Thanks!

"Woof..."

As I was about to relax again, I felt the piercing stare of our guard dog's watchful eyes.

Okay... Sorry about that.

"Arf."

We shouldn't do maintenance in a dungeon, Fran. It's too dangerous.

"All right."

Either way, that was nice. My body felt lighter and I was already more relaxed, despite being in one of the most dangerous places on the planet. We still needed to level up something combat-related though.

Any other skills you want to level up?

"Hmm. How about your Dimension Magic?"

My Dimension Magic?

Granted, it was an interesting skill tree, but there weren't any spells that we absolutely needed to have at the moment. Dimension Magic was the last skill I expected Fran to increase.

Are you sure you don't want Advanced Sword Mastery or Arts instead?

"Dimension Magic is more interesting."

What makes you say that?

"The door the Beast King's bodyguard used."

I guess that worked on the same principle.

Royce's Dimension Door. The name suggested that it was something we could learn with Dimension Magic.

"Meeting Lumina would be easier if we had that."

In fact, there was the possibility that Dimension Door would trivialize it. We had Long Jump, but that wasn't going to work. There was a weight limit to Dimension Jump, and the user only transported whatever they touched. That meant I had to maintain contact with Fran and Jet as I jumped, and Jet's original form was too large for me to transport. The heavier the load, the more likely it was that the spell would miss. Also, the dungeon walls had anti-teleportation properties to prevent adventurers from skipping floors. Even if you teleported your way through, your mana would be dry before you got to the stairs.

On the other hand, Dimension Door didn't look like it had a weight limit. You probably couldn't cast it in the heat of battle, but it was much more useful when it came to regular transportation.

All right, I'm leveling up Dimension Magic.

I didn't know how many points it would take, so I raised the level one at a time. By the time I hit Level 3, the spell still hadn't unlocked. I was beginning to worry it was limited to Royce's Class. However, my worries were dispelled when I hit Level 4. I finally gained a spell that looked promising.

Dimension Gate. Close enough.

Dimension Gate recorded your current location so you could teleport there at a later time. Anyone could use the gate once it was linked, as long as they were small enough to fit through. Charging the spell with mana allowed you to create a bigger gate—big enough for Jet to pass.

Dimension Gate was close enough to Dimension Door, although it wasn't quite the same. Its default size was closer to a tunnel, and it couldn't span large distances. Teleporting to Lumina's room from outside the dungeon would be downright impossible .

Now that we have the spell we wanted, anything else you want to level up?

It took 3 EP for a single level of Dimension Magic, so we'd spent nine to get it up to Level 4. I had 21 EP left. Should we continue leveling up Dimension Magic, or invest in something else?

"How about Spirit Control...?"

Uh-huh. Mind if I ask why?

"The Beast King has it. Maybe it's a requirement for evolution."

Fran wanted to copy the skills the Golden Fire Lion had. We could probably get Spirit Control if we leveled up Spirit Manipulation. It was the one skill Rigdith had that was easy to unlock. It was worth a shot.

Okay, here we go.

"Hm."

Ooh, here it comes!

I put five points into Spirit Manipulation, and got Spirit Control for my trouble.

Anything?

"..."

Fran shook her head. Unfortunately, that was not the key to her evolution. Still, I felt something changed inside of me when I got it. I felt more sensitive with my detection skills, thanks to an improved mana circulation. And that wasn't all.

Let me try something—

I Transmogrified my blade into a long bit of ribbon and wrote letters in the air. Then, I turned it into ten pieces of string which I could manipulate individually.

“Wow, that’s cool, Teacher.”

The control of my inner mana is on another level now. This is a great skill.

I morphed myself into several different forms, testing out the mobility of each one. Control was much finer now, and I used up less mana to maintain my shape. Spirit Control was a simple skill, but it was definitely useful.

What else can w— Fran, get ready!

“Hm!”

“Grr!”

We stopped conversing and dropped into battle stances. A murderous aura was approaching. It didn’t come from one of the dungeon’s monsters—it was far too directed to be raw animal instinct.

Archfiend Linford. Black Tiger Lumina. The Beast King. Our travels had allowed us to encounter such powerful people. The owner of the aura was nowhere near as strong as them, but he was much more bloodthirsty. Killing Fran wouldn’t be enough for him. He was thinking of ways to make her suffer as she died. His malice was sharp enough to pierce skin.

“Geheheheh... It’s been such a long time. I’ve missed you.”

Three men walked out of the darkness and glared at us.

“Solus!”

“Heeheehee! Correct!”

Solus chortled as Fran looked at him, dumbstruck. Something was wrong with his head. His high-pitched cackling suggested that his sanity wasn’t what it used to be either. He was definitely stronger though. The pressure he exerted was on a different level compared to when we

caught him. He couldn't have powered up so much over a short period of time. Was he on something?

He had two men with him. The figures in the shadows were humanoid in shape, but when one of them stepped into the light I wondered if it had ever been human. Muscles bulged all over its body, looking like they were about to burst out, or perhaps they had *already* burst. No human could achieve that kind of monstrous physique, no matter how hard they trained. The creature made Elza look like a featherweight. Its mutated muscles were a sign that it had abandoned humanity.

It looked similar to the Corrupted Humans we fought in Bulbola, but different. This thing wasn't emitting Malice and its skin wasn't the color of onyx. The muscles on its skull had hypertrophied to the point that its face was no longer recognizable. With that kind of head, walking in a straight line constituted an amazing feat.

"Who are they?"

"That's for you to find out! They're just some slaves my accomplice supplied me with. They look awful, I know, but they're awfully strong too! Get it?! Hahahahaha!"

Accomplice. That cleared things up. I knew Solus couldn't have regenerated his lost limbs by himself. The other party member looked human enough. His face was covered with a bit of cloth, but a quick Identify revealed who it was.

"Seldio."

"Oh? How did you guess?"

Seldio took off his mask when Fran called him out, revealing the handsome face of the noble outside the city gates. Fran glared at him, although not with the hatred she had toward Solus. After all, he was Inina's killer. Still, she

glared at Seldio with the fury he deserved for trying to steal me.

“Lord Seldio, should you really be revealing your true identity so soon?”

“She’s going to die. It makes no difference.”

“Hehehe. I won’t argue with you there!”

“This is all because of your attachment to the sword. That sword wants me, a selfless hero, to use it... You’re going to pay for being such a selfish little girl. You’re going to pay with your life.”

Seldio ran his mouth just like he did when we first met him. He made it sound like we were the bad guys. Seldio had no idea that he was capable of evil. He was convinced that he was the hero and Fran was the villain. In that regard, he was worse than Linford. But the mental state of Solus and his cronies wasn’t the strangest thing about them.

Are those...swords stuck in their necks?

All three of them had been stabbed in the back of their necks. The swords were like a thin estoc, and looked like they supported their entire bodies. I reckoned the blades ran the entire length of their spines. There was a carving of a screaming man on the pommels. It looked downright disturbing.

I felt mana emitting from the swords, and a lot of hatred. It was similar to Seldio’s hatred for us. Was it being amplified by the swords?

Solus and his crew weren’t bleeding... Were the swords the source of their altered state? I couldn’t identify the estocs though. They must be pretty powerful.

“What’s with the swords?”

“Oh, you noticed? Being stabbed is the greatest feeling in the world! Hyahahaha! And I’m a lot stronger because of

it too!”

“That’s right! This sword really is the greatest! Ahahaha!”

The sword granted enhanced strength as well as euphoric ecstasy. Considering how strong Solus had gotten over the last few days, it must’ve been an upper as well as a steroid. Seldio was a lot stronger too. He was still no A-Rank, but he was definitely as strong as a B-Rank now. And these two monsters were joking around in front of us.

“Did Seldio break you out of jail?”

“What, *now* you want to know every detail of my life? Correct! Seldio and the others broke me out! Right after they killed all the guards!”

“Others?”

“Why don’t you force the answer out of me, like last time?!”

“You asked for it.”

Solus’s trip made him annoying.

“I’m going to kill you *so hard*!” he said. “I’ll pay you back for what you did to me ten times over!”

“If only you could’ve been more selfless,” said Seldio. “No matter. Regret your sins as you die. Do not worry for your sword. I’ll put it to good use.”

Seldio was still after me. He flashed his sparkling white teeth, but in the dim dungeon the sight was just disturbing.

“You’re after my sword?”

“Pretty much. I still need to pay you back for what you did to me, but my accomplices took an interest in your sword. Fine, I’ll kill you and then take your precious sword! Our master will be very pleased with it, I think.”

“Master?”

Who was this “master”?

“Ahyahyaha! You’ll have to figure that one out yourself!” said Solus.

“You are going to die today. It would be useless to tell you about our master. You don’t deserve to know.”

Seldio was acquainted with this master as well. And the fake A-Rank showed such deference to them too.

“Hehehe! You look terrifying! Are you that upset that I killed Inina?”

“...!”

Solus hit Fran’s nerve. Pent-up rage immediately burst out. This was exactly what Solus wanted.

Don’t fall for it, Fran!

“You’re going to die.”

“Yahahaha! But that’s my line! You’re going to pay for what you did to me...a hundred times over!”

Despite nearly being killed the last time he met Fran, Solus was boasting. This time however, he actually had the stats to back it up. He had Abnormal Regeneration and Pain Disruption now. Did the sword give him those skills? Then there was his Fanatic status. He *did* seem like a crazed fanatic...but I didn’t know for sure whether that was responsible for it. There were too many things I didn’t know!

“Hyahahaha! You’ll suffer the same pointless death as Inina!”

“I’ll kill you!”

Going into battle against a powered-up Solus and Seldio was dangerous enough, but Solus had agitated Fran to the point of fury. Inina’s death wasn’t something she would forgive.

“Hahahaha!” Solus laughed. “You will suffer a painful death!”

“And then your sword will be mine!” said Seldio.

The latent mana coursing through them exploded. They were more dangerous than ever before. In my panic, I identified them again. Their Fanatic state remained, but now something else was added to their status list.

Fran! These guys are in Unleash Potential!

“!”

Fran’s eyes widened in shock. Unleash Potential was a double-edged sword, and she knew its effects firsthand. I looked over their skills. No Unleash Potential there. The stat boosts were real enough though. They weren’t going to give the Beast King’s bodyguards a run for their money, but the increase was still frightening. Even then, Fran sallied forth.

Fran! We need to make a strategic retreat! It’s too dangerous!

A strategic retreat was still a retreat, but maybe Fran would buy the dignified wording.

“Haaa!”

Nope! She was seeing red now, there was nothing I could do to stop her!

“Heeheehee! *Die!*”

In an ideal world, we would capture them and bring them in for questioning. But Solus and his cronies were far too dangerous. Even now I thought of taking the reins and evacuating.

“No,” Fran growled. “*You’re* going to die!”

Damn it! No choice now!

Their stats are way above ours! Forget what you know about the old Solus! And Seldio is no longer some two-bit

noble either!

“Hm!”

Jet, keep the big guy busy!

“Grrr!”

Jet rushed toward the big and silent muscleman. According to Identify, his name was Dahlum and he was human, as hard as it was to believe. His deformed body was a product of a skill. His Strength ballooned to over 800, although his Agility was a measly 100. Like Solus, he had Abnormal Regeneration and Pain Disruption. Jet should be able to take care of him, although I was curious how this thing actually fought. Despite having the Mastery and Arts skills for Axe and Shield, he fought with his bare hands. He didn't have much in the way of Martial Arts, so Jet should be able to mitigate his raw stats, as long as he was careful.

“...”

Jet poked Dahlum in an effort to bait him away, and it worked. The lumbering meat-creature chased after Jet in complete silence, adding to his disturbing nature. With the players in place, the battle in the tight hallway began.

“Haaa!”

“Hyahaha!”

Solus was rocking some decent gear. Even his sword was enchanted.

“Come on, is that all you got?!”

“Urgh!”

Solus's fighting style was frantic, but it was still dangerous. He was beneath Fran in terms of skill, but his superior Strength and Agility allowed him to stand his ground. We landed some hits, but Abnormal Regeneration healed any superficial wounds we inflicted. Pain Disruption

was also working its magic. Nothing we did made him back down.

“He’s not the only one you need to worry about.”

“Ugh!”

“Hyahahaha! Nice!”

Seldio took a different tack. He took advantage of the blindspots Solus created with his furious slashes. He even hit Solus from time to time. Not that it mattered, with Solus’s Abnormal Regeneration. Seldio’s strikes came from an odd angle too. The sword rattled as he swung, and it looked like it had a life of its own.

“Impressive. Chain Snake only grazed you.”

Seldio’s sword was segmented. In practice, the weapon moved more like a whip than a blade. Fresh blood flowed from the graze in Fran’s arm as she dodged. However, the flesh around her wound soon blackened.

Antidote! Heal!

Chain Snake was enchanted with a deadly poison.

“Hoho!” Seldio laughed. “You have Regeneration? *And* Antidote?”

“Hyahahaha! Good! I can make you suffer for longer!”

Solus’s attacks grew wilder. The sight of Fran’s blood excited him. His wild swings worked to our advantage. His forward rush left Seldio with no time to catch up. Fran saw it the gap in their offense and struck. She parried Solus’s attack and aimed for his head.

“Hmph!”

“Hyahaha—gurk?”

She drove me right through his mouth and out the back of his neck. His bloodshot eyes stopped mid-cackle. The fire

imbued in my blade fried his brain and withered his eyeballs, reducing them to little more than foam.

One down!

“Hm.”

Fran turned her attention to Seldio.

“Urk!”

But then, she was forced to jump away.

“Aww, I missed? You have amazing reflexes!”

He regenerated a fried brain?! How?!

Solus was back, looking no worse for wear. I could understand a Corrupted Human coming back from that kind of damage. But Solus was technically still human. How did he survive having the insides of his skull cooked?

“You think that’s enough to kill me?! Kyahahaha!”

What was it going to take to kill this guy?! It must’ve been the Abnormal Regeneration. The skill consumed an inordinate amount of mana, but it allowed him to recover from absurd amounts of damage. Unleash Potential only made the skill more effective. He was practically immortal.

Solus resumed his assault on Fran as though the sword through his throat was nothing more than a dream.

“You’ve got nowhere to run!”

The cramped hallways of the dungeon made for poor maneuverability.

We’ll go with a big one!

“Hm!”

If targeting his vitals weren’t enough, then surely burning him to smithereens would do the trick.

Eat this!

I launched a Flare Explode, big enough catch Fran in the explosion. The heat and explosive force was amplified by the tight hallway. There was a reason I only used this spell outside. The red flames engulfed Solus and Seldio, while I used Dimension Shift to redirect the fire around us. Speedcasting these powerful spells in rapid succession consumed a lot of mana, and I could only do it thanks to my large reserves.

Don't let your guard down, Fran!

"Hm!"

That should be enough to burn them to ashes, but we were dealing with near immortals. There was a high chance they would survive, although recovering from the blast would still take some time. They weren't packing any barrier skills, so they shouldn't be able to block.

We'll finish them with our most powerful attack!

"Hm!"

We backed away from the explosion. Fran dropped me to her hip and readied a Pressurized Quickdraw. This would be our finishing blow.

What...?

Or at least, it would've been. But Solus jumped through the roaring flames unscathed. His clothes weren't even singed.

"They...regenerated?"

No. Look at his gear. They're not even burnt.

They had used something to protect themselves.

"Heheheheh! That was amazing! I must've been crazy to challenge you last time!"

Did he nullify the spell or the flames?

“I’ve never seen that kind of firepower. You could burn down an entire city!” Solus joked.

The spell had failed to affect him, and he didn’t look particularly worried.

We need to watch them to see what they did.

“Hm.”

The narrow halls of the dungeon prevented them from running, and I’d fired all our thunder, wind, and earth spells at them. We needed to figure out their trick!

“Kihahaha! You have so many tricks up your sleeve! But they’re all useless!”

Solus charged right at the salvo of spells without attempting to block.

“Hah! Too easy!”

That sword! It must be nullifying our spells!

Earth bullets, lightning chains, and wind blades—all dissipated into smoke as soon as they got close. At the same time, the sword at the back of his neck glowed.

Complete magic protection...? But it’s taking a lot out of him!

Magic nullification still required mana. The sword sucked up Solus’s life force the way a sprout took nutrients from the soil. That was why he didn’t do this earlier. His life was being consumed by Unleash Potential. If he kept it up, it would eventually consume him. The two opted for a blitz, because they didn’t have much time.

Solus jumped through the dissipated hail of spells without losing speed.

“Yahaaa! Now die!”

“Hmph!”

Fran's Pressurized Quickdraw was ready to go. She ducked under Solus's mad dash and dodged Seldio by a hair's breadth. She aimed me right at Solus's neck.

We had stories about immortals back on Earth too. No matter how strong they were, cutting off their heads was the trusted method of sealing them away. We would decapitate Solus and get his head as far away from his body as possible. He shouldn't be able to regenerate then. There was the possibility of him growing another head, but we'd cross that bridge when we got there.

Say goodbye to your head!

"Hyahaha!"

Solus put up his arm just before I made contact.

Too late for that!

I was accelerating with the speed of Pressurized Quickdraw. A limb wouldn't do him much good.

"Keeh! Too bad!"

Or at least, it shouldn't have.

Impossible!

My blade was buried partway through his arm.

"Argh!"

Solus took advantage of our shock and gouged his sword into Fran's side. She tried dodging, but the damage was already done. She was coughing up a lot of blood.

I'll heal you up— Wh-what's going on?!

I couldn't heal her. I tried, but it wouldn't cast.

Fran, you have to Regenerate yourself!

Already am...

But the wound showed barely any sign of healing. She was recovering, but very slowly. Something was blocking the

full potential of Regeneration. It would take over thirty minutes for her to heal completely, and that was thirty minutes we didn't have!

It's that sword again! It's blocking the effects!

Solus had blocked Pressurized Quickdraw! The sword could prevent spells and skills from being used. Without Vibrofang and Elemental Sword, Pressurized Quickdraw was little more than a fancy slash. Still powerful, but no match for Solus's enhanced state. I tried teleporting us away in my panic, but that wasn't working either.

Damn it!

We couldn't teleport and we didn't have anywhere to run. Solus had sealed off our every path of escape. Even if Fran could run, she was injured, and Solus would easily be able to catch her. This was the worst possible scenario. At least we had another shot...

"Hahah! Are you hoping your Bracelet of Sacrifice will save you? Well, it won't! Without mana, that thing's nothing more than a fancy bangle!"

Are you kidding me?! That was our last hope!

"Hyahahaha! I'm gonna take my time killing you...!"

Solus and Seldio came at us again.

"Pierce! Blitz Horn!"

"Urk!"

"Pierce pierce pierce pierce!"

Seldio took out a new magic weapon. The invisible wind lance activated on the word "pierce." Despite its low damage, Fran's inability to heal made the weapon more dangerous.

"Raaargh!"

"Pierce! Pierce! Fuhahaha!"

Fran went on the defensive. She managed to avoid direct hits, but the superficial wounds were piling up—most of them from Seldio's wind lance. Blood flowed freely from the gash in her side, staining the dungeon red.

Blood loss slowed her down, making Seldio's chain sword harder to dodge. Seldio pursued her relentlessly while Solus provided cover, unconcerned for his own safety. Eventually, the chain sword grazed Fran's shoulder. She did an amazing job of dodging in her injured state, but a graze from the Chain Snake was enough to kill.

Antidote! Damn it, it's not working!

The graze on her left shoulder blackened as it spread through her body.

"Oomph..."

"Hyahaha! What's the matter? Getting tired?"

The poison had only been in her system for ten seconds and her movements were already dull. Intense pain pulsed inside her, stopping her completely from time to time. But, in an amazing show of mental fortitude, Fran kept going.

Fran, talk to me!

I'm fine, Teacher...calm down.

She was right. I was panicking, but Fran still intended to fight. Her weak voice told me that she didn't have much left.

Can you get away from them somehow?

No. That's why I won't.

What?

Teacher. Put all our EP in ____.

A-all right.

I went ahead with Fran's plan. I would use Unleash Potential if it came to it, although I didn't know how long I could withstand it with Regeneration sealed away. At least Fran could make it out alive.

I invested all our EP in the skill she chose. The P.A.'s kind, uncaring voice echoed in my mind.

___ is now at Level 10.

Acquired skill ___.

Requirements have been met.

Acquired Unique Skill ___.

Acquired ___. Gained the Title ___.

That was a lot of announcements!

Here they come!

"Hm...!"

"Heeheehee! You still wanna fight? Your attacks barely hurt!"

Solus charged in with foolish confidence. Unskilled he might be, but we had no way of stopping his charge. He was already putting us under a lot of pressure.

Stay sharp, Fran!

She told me to calm down, but I couldn't help myself. Still, even as I was screaming my head off, Fran remained Fran.

Hm. Don't worry. I'll win.

Fran...

Her voice had an infectious calm. I felt what she was going through as she tightened her grip on me. Her body

was nearing its limits, her mind was foggy as a London morning. I saw it all. It felt like Fran and I were one. It was oddly comforting. I didn't know whether Fran felt the same thing, but it was nice. It was as though we took each other's pains and worries, and cleared them away.

Fran's left eye blackened as the poison worked its way through. Blood flowed down her cheeks like red-hot tears. She wouldn't be able to see out of that eye soon, and the pain must've been significant.

Even then, Fran remained resolute.

I'll cut him down for what he did to Inina. Help me.

Of course... He's done for!

Hm!

"Gya ha ha ha!"

Fran settled me on her hip as Solus charged forward. No Pressurized Quickdraw here. The sword in Solus's back would nullify the pressure, and anyway, she didn't have a sheath to quickdraw with. Instead, I focused the mana within my blade, telling myself that Solus's magic nullification shouldn't have much effect. Most of my offensive skills projected outward, which made them a waste of mana.

Fran ducked underneath Solus's attack, just like last time. He sneered at her, predicting her dodge.

"What about now?! Yaaah!"

He laughed, underestimating Fran's abilities. However, she stayed her course. Despite her critical state, she kept her composure.

Here we go.

Do it.

She coiled her body and thrust me toward Solus's neck. But, just like last time, he managed to put up his arm.

"Keeheehee!"

Solus grinned maniacally, thinking he'd won. His smile disappeared as soon as I was lodged in his neck. I would've decapitated him, if it weren't for the cold steel of the sword in his spine. We were so close!

"What... But..."

Solus couldn't believe it. His left arm was gone, and blood gushed from his neck. He didn't know what to make of it.

"Blue...light...?"

"Haaa!"

Fran resumed her assault. With one fluid motion, she lopped Solus's right hand off, chopped his legs from under him, and stabbed him right in the heart. By the time the gash in his neck was healing, Fran was already slicing his skull. Solus's body, enhanced and fortified by various magicks and skills, was torn to ribbons.

I counted fifteen cuts in total, twelve of which were directed at his vital parts. Regenerating his vital organs took a lot of his life force, and Solus's energy plummeted. Abnormal Regeneration refused to turn off, and used up his vital forces to regenerate his organs.

"How... Why..."

Solus's bewildered whispers were his final words. He never knew what hit him. His eyes lost their glimmer and he crumpled to the floor. But Fran didn't watch his final moments. Her remaining eye was trained on Seldio. She approached him quietly while he was still shocked by his friend's grisly death. Finally, Seldio snapped out of it and readied his sword.

“What did you do to him, villain?!”

“You’re going to see for yourself.”

“I am the chosen one! I am righteous! Any who oppose me add to the evils of the world!”

Fran remained quiet. The poison might have reached her vocal cords, although it was more likely that she had just lost interest. She knew he was no longer a match for her.

“Yaaaargh!”

Seldio was faster than Solus, thanks to his Advanced Sword Mastery. I reckoned that he was strong enough to cut a High Ogre in two. This was the man that managed to land a hit on Fran, after all. He snaked his sword whip toward her, firing wind lances all the while. Dodging one would mean eating the other, but Fran advanced calmly.

To the naked eye, it seemed she was dodging the wind spears while randomly blocking the sword whip, but there was nothing random about her movements. Seldio’s idea of a peerless, ultimate attack was nothing more than child’s play. She jabbed my hilt against Seldio’s chain blade, rattling it. That slight rattle was enough to throw the whip sword off its path, and now it looked like the blade was avoiding Fran altogether. This move was impossible to pull off without a lot of skill, and the sudden change in his blade’s trajectory made Seldio stagger.

Fran moved in for the kill. She attacked every part of Seldio’s body, just like she did Solus.

“No! This cannot be! How can this happen to me?!”

Seldio struggled to protect his weak spots, desperate not to end up like his friend. Fran worked easily around his defenses and cut him to pieces. She predicted Seldio’s guard strategy and attacked whatever part he left defenseless. She stabbed his body when he covered his

head, chopped his legs when he protected his body, and went for his head when he defended anything else. She worked so fast that he didn't have a chance to react.

Since Seldio's magic weapon wasn't that powerful, Fran kept pummeling it. Once it was broken, the battle was as good as won.

"Haa!"

Fran let out a short battle cry as she went in for the kill. She was more efficient at killing immortals now, and sliced Seldio up even faster than Solus.

"No...! No!"

Seldio jumped away, having received over twenty fatal slashes. He didn't have much life force or mana left. His arms and legs were no more, and blood gushed out of his four stumps. Seldio looked pitiful as he lay trembling on the ground.

"How can I lose to a worthless gimmick...?"

Gimmick? What was he talking about? And then I noticed that Fran and I were shining blue. Weird. I had thought we couldn't use magic...

The same thing had happened on the floating island. A mysterious blue light enveloped Fran and I, powering us up. And in Bulbola, during the final moments of the Linford fight. In both cases, we were fighting a powerful enemy, and were nearly dead. Did the blue light trigger when Fran and I were pushed to our limits?

In any case, we knew it was on our side. It saved us twice before, and it would save us again.

"Impossible... I'm...the chosen one..."

Seldio's dying words were as stupid as Solus's.

"Gurk..."

Fran fell to the ground. With Seldio dead, she had no more reason to stay on her feet.

Greater Heal! Antidote!

My spells were working again! With their hosts dead, the swords lost their power. Fran was barely conscious. She blinked as she stared at the dungeon ceiling.

Can you see?

"Hm."

Good thing I cured her before the venom could do lasting damage.

"We won..."

Yeah. The way you finished them both at the end was astounding.

It was like she used some kind of skill to increase her strength, but Fran wasn't even using Elemental Blade. She was using a version of Sword Mastery which consumed absolutely no mana. It all started when Solus nullified our Pressurized Quickdraw. She noticed that I had lost a lot of power in having my skills sealed away, and decided to make up for it herself.

Even if Solus had the ability to seal skills, he was still made of flesh and blood. She figured that she could kill him, just as long as she had good enough swordplay. It wasn't something that a sword like me could understand, but as my user, Fran knew it instantly.

She understood that Solus wouldn't be able to nullify the effects of a passive mastery skill: Sword King Mastery Earth. Simply increasing the level of Sword Mastery didn't mean that you would suddenly be able to use your latent abilities—you still had to practice. Regardless, it was going to have some effect on your swordplay, and that's what Fran bet our lives on. Considering we won, it paid off.

I recalled the P.A.'s voice from earlier.

Sword King Mastery Earth is now at Level 10. Acquired skill: Enhanced Sword Mastery.

Requirements have been met. Sword King Mastery Earth has evolved to Enhanced Sword King Mastery.

Acquired Sword King Mastery. Gained the Title Sword King.

Upon maxing out Sword King Mastery Earth, she acquired the skill Enhanced Sword Mastery, along with the Unique Skill Enhanced Sword King Mastery.

Sword King Mastery: Ability to use all swords.

Couldn't get any vaguer than that. But there was no doubt that this was the pinnacle of the Sword Mastery tree. Only time would tell how powerful this skill was, but judging by how Fran made a fool of Seldio's Advanced Sword Mastery, it was already paying off. I couldn't imagine how much better she would get with some practice.

And Fran had a new title.

Sword King: A title bestowed on those who have walked the path of the blade.

Effect: Plus twenty to all stats. Increases effectiveness of Enhanced Sword Mastery. Ability to appraise swords.

The title was even stronger than Veteran and Super Glutton. Plus twenty to all stats was the equivalent of gaining four to five levels. This was why she could dispose of Solus and Seldio so easily. She acquired better handling from Sword King Mastery, but she also got the firepower to cut them down from Enhanced Sword Mastery and this title. The raw attacks she used to kill Solus were comparable to some Advanced Sword Arts. But while we had won, we had no time to relax.

“We have to go help Jet.”

You’re right!

Jet had drawn Dahlum away from us, so we wouldn’t be caught in their crossfire. They were fighting about a hundred meters away.

Jet’s in trouble!

“We have to save him!”

It looks like Dahlum’s sword has the same magic nullification effect.

Jet’s main strategy was hit and run combat with Dark Magic. He was not having an easy time with his spells locked away. His body was already beat up. Without Regeneration, he was practically dying. We followed the blood trail to find him struggling and Dahlum unharmed. The only thing keeping Jet from being squashed was his superior agility and judgment. He firmly believed that Fran and I would help him after we beat Solus, so he desperately tried to keep Dahlum busy.

“Grrrrr!”

Jet was doing a good job. I worried that he’d lost some of his feral nature since we started keeping him, but he was still a wolf when push came to shove. But Dahlum’s meat

armor made me doubt that we could take him down with a few slices.

Fran, getting close to him is too risky. We'll have to take him out from here.

Fran had lost too much blood. She was barely holding on to me as it was.

"From here?"

Yeah. We should still be able to use our spells and skills from here. I'll take the shot.

"Hm. All right!"

Fran knew my intentions. She flipped me upside down and dropped into a fighting stance.

Ready?

"Hm! Haaaa!"

Fran used her own body like a bow, and flung me as hard as she could with Wind Magic. I was flying at a pretty good speed, but I accelerated even further with some wind and fire spells, and Telekinesis.

Yeeeeehaw!

A full force Telekinetic Catapult. Dahlum's sword might be able to nullify magic, but it couldn't nullify the physics of my blade. I sped toward the hulking creature at top speed.

"Grrr!"

"..."

The monster formerly known as Dahlum noticed me, but Jet had already pinned down his ankle. I plunged deep into his chest.

Damn! You're tougher than you look!

I thought I was going to blow him away in one hit, but Dahlum's defenses proved too thick. Layers of sinewy

muscles softened the blow, distributing the impact all over his body.

“...”

Dahlum moved to try and pull me out. But this chance was too good to waste!

Just die already, you big lug!

His sword had sealed my Telekinesis, but I still had a trick up my sleeve. I activated Transmogrify, and morphed myself into the same shape I used to kill the pillbug. My blade separated into countless spikes and began puncturing him from the inside.

“...”

I felt the spikes run through his blood vessels into his heart, brain, and other organs. The grotesque mass of muscle looked even worse with spikes protruding out of him. Dahlum managed to grab my hilt, but my spikes anchored me in place.

We'll just stay here until you die.

“...”

Dahlum remained silent, but his grip was definitely weakening.

“...”

Finally, his movements ceased.

We did it...

“Hm.”

“Woof woof!”

You did great, Jet.

“Good boy.”

“Bark!”

I healed his wounds as Fran rewarded him with a pat.

I still can't identify these swords... I can't even see their names. I was hoping that would give us a clue as to where they came from.

"It looks gross."

The pommel? Disturbing, isn't it?

The sword wasn't the only thing that was still a mystery.

Who were they working for?

"Probably some big shot."

Which means they have an entire conspiracy backing them up.

We had killed Solus, Seldio, and Dahlum, but I remembered Seldio having other members in his party. They were definitely in on it, too. They might be able to tell us something if we brought them in. I stored the three bodies away as evidence. Suddenly, Jet pointed his muzzle down a dark path.

Did you catch that, Fran?

"Hm."

Someone was running away from us, as fast as their legs would take them.

It might be their accomplices!

"I'm going after them!"

It could be an innocent soul, but chasing them down couldn't hurt. Eventually, we caught up.

Bingo.

"Wh-what the hell is wrong with you! Why'd you attack me?!"

"No use playing dumb. I remember you."

Well, I do at least.

Fran had completely forgotten, but this man was the scout in Seldio's party. He was currently on the ground after Fran kicked him square in the spine. We weren't going to let our primary suspect go.

"I-I come from a line of nobles! You think you can get away with this?!"

"Shut up."

"Oomph!"

Fran's gentle caresses helped calm the man down. He was a lot less spunky than Solus, that was for sure, but we didn't get much out of him. He didn't know about the sword, or how Seldio was involved with Solus. The scout knew who they served at least: an upper crust noble with a penchant for collecting enchanted swords. He also knew about Dahlum. The ironclad warrior had had a skill which increased muscle hypertrophy, and which was further amplified by the power of the sword.

"I can't say anymore... Please."

His face was slightly disfigured now, but that wasn't the reason behind his impediment. I sensed an odd manaflow inside him. I thought he was spineless, but I was wrong. His speech was limited by a spell which didn't allow him to discuss important details. It was a similar spell cast on the Dungeon Master by the Goddess of Chaos, albeit on a far smaller scale.

We can't get anything more out of him.

What now?

We'll hand him over to the guild. There was another mage girl in their party. She should be able to do something about the spell.

All right.

Let's get him tied up.

We were getting used to nabbing baddies in the dungeon. We tied him up, loaded him on top of Jet, and covered his face with a bit of cloth.

Let's go.

We were almost to the depths, so using the Return Pillar there was the best way of getting out. But when we got there, Fran had other things on her mind.

Fran, we have to get this man to Dias.

"I know..."

She wanted to meet Lumina again. As much as I wanted to let her meet the old Black Tiger, apprehending these criminals took priority. If the mage figured out that all her friends were dead, she might get away. It was a race against the clock.

We exited the dungeon and hurried toward the guild. Even then, Jet and I were still on the lookout for the Beast King. The events from last night had thoroughly traumatized us. Fortunately, we didn't run into him this time, and we arrived at the guild in one piece.

The receptionist was getting used to seeing Fran, and she let us straight in to meet Dias.

"Oh, have you completed your quests?"

"Hm."

"And...it seems like you brought more trouble. Goodness..."

Dias sighed deeply.

So we were in East Dungeon—

I told Dias the quick and dirty: that we killed Solus and arrested this man.

“What? So this is Solus’s accomplice?”

Seems like it. He said he was a noble, though, so I wasn’t eager to start maiming him right away.

“We’ll figure that out on our side. You’re going to hand him over, right?”

That’s the plan. But be careful with this one all right? We don’t want another Solus incident.

“Of course. I apologize for the trouble we put you through.”

Dias bowed his head in apology. He was really sorry that Fran almost died for Ulmutt’s negligence. Seeing his sincerity, Fran nodded.

“It’s okay.”

“Thank you. Really.”

It’s no big deal, Dias.

“It is. If anything happened to you, I would be next...”

So that’s what he was worried about. Dias was afraid that Fran would tell Amanda. In the end, he apologized out of concern for his own safety.

You owe us big time.

“I know. Which is why I’ll do everything in my power to help you. I will not let those nobles harass you. I’ll make sure of it personally.”

That would help.

“Anything else you’d like to tell me while we wait for the authorities? Have you wrapped up all your quests?”

“Hm.”

Fran nodded. She took out the tarp tucked away in Dias’s office and laid out the materials for the collection quest. Dias grinned.

"I heard that there was something going on with the spawn rates today. Something about there not being enough monsters. But you seem to have done all right."

"Jet did a great job."

"I see, I see. You know, the others took it as an omen and refused to enter the dungeon today. But oh, to be young again."

The odd state of the dungeon didn't seem to bother Dias in the slightest. He didn't deem it necessary to put out an emergency notice either. Instead, he carried on examining Fran's collection.

Don't you need to be somewhere else, Dias?

"How rude of you."

But isn't there something weird going on with the dungeon? Shouldn't you be helping the other adventurers, since you're the only one who can negotiate with Lumina?

"Aaah, that. Well, you don't need to worry about it. I don't think anything bad is going to happen. Probably anyway."

Dias's nonchalant phrasing worried me, but his attitude toward the dungeon situation probably meant that everything was going to be fine. He might even know what was going on.

"Do you mind if I ask for Solus and his accomplices' corpses?"

Sure. Do I just lay them out here?

"Be my guest."

I took out Solus, Seldio, and Dahlum. Dias's eyes widened at the muscle monster Dahlum had become.

"Is this thing supposed to be human?"

Used to be, at least. Guy named Dahlum.

“Seldio’s party member... What happened to him? And what are these swords in their necks?”

I don’t know the details, but the sword’s probably the reason why he got this big. It powered them up and sealed the magic of everything around them. Solus and Seldio were on a whole different level.

“I see... They don’t look like anything you can get from an honest blacksmith.”

I agree. Solus was acting a lot crazier than before. I think the sword might be to blame.

“Yikes. So it powered them up *and* drove them crazy? I can’t imagine that made them very friendly. How did their master get them to listen?”

I was hoping you could look into it.

I certainly didn’t have a clue. All I knew was that the mana coming out of these things felt bad. Gross. Was I the only one who noticed? Fran sure didn’t seem to. I thought about the first time we met Seldio outside the city gates, and realized that it was the same kind of dirty vibe he gave off back then. I thought it was his toxic personality, but the sword emanated its dark aura even while unequipped.

“Bad mana? I can’t say I feel anything of the sort.”

You, too, huh?

We exchanged information with Dias until someone knocked on the door.

“Is that you, Elza?”

“Yes.”

“Come in.”

“Frannie! I’m so sorry about— What the hell is that?”

We briefed Elza on the situation, and she looked furious when we were done. “Oooh... That woman! I thought she

was acting weird. But to think that she was plotting to separate me from Fran!”

The mage, the female member of Seldio’s party, was the one who’d requested Elza’s intercession. “Seldio” was also present, though his face was covered, probably because the *real* Seldio was in the middle of killing Fran at the time. By creating an alibi and separating Fran from Elza, they’d killed two birds with one stone.

“Elza, I want you to arrest that woman as soon as possible. The guild is at your disposal. I need to make it clear that there are consequences.”

“You got it, Guildmaster!”

“I’m coming with you.”

“There is still something I need to discuss with you, Fran. Let Elza handle this one.”

“But...”

Listen to Dias, Fran. You know you’re not in top fighting condition. Get some rest.

“Fine...”

Fran wanted to bring in anyone remotely related to Inina’s death. Even so, she needed to rest and recover.

“Well, I’m off!”

“Good luck.”

“Thank you, Frannie! It’ll only take a second with you rooting for me!”

Elza stormed out of the room. Dias smiled wryly at his second-in-command, before turning around with some kind of crystal in his hand.

“We’ll bring the rest of the fugitives in, don’t worry. Anyway, I’ve gone over your materials and found no

problems with them. Now, I am pleased to announce that you are a C-Rank adventurer.”

Finally!

“Hm.”

“Woof!”

I wouldn’t have to worry about the Beast King as much. Fran and Jet looked equally pleased. Dias called in a clerk to prepare the documents for Fran’s Personal Quest. He wanted to announce the fact that Fran was now under the guild’s protection as soon as he got the chance.

Do you really need to let everyone know?

“Yes. It’s a precaution against idiot politicians, you see. We need to make sure that everyone knows. Even the Beast King wouldn’t make an enemy out of the Adventurer’s Guild. As an adventurer himself, he knows how powerful we really are.”

I was just checking. Seldio’s conspiracy and the threat of the Beast King were far from being solved, but at least we could forget about them for now. Which left one thing on the agenda.

“There’s something I want to ask you.”

“What is it?”

Tell us about the Black Cat girl from fifty-three years ago.

“I see... Aurel told you, huh?”

“Hm.”

“That’s what I was going to tell you actually. But, hmm... You’ve met the Beast King, I take it?”

How’d you know?

He couldn't have read our minds through Complete Thought Protection.

"What can I say? It's my job to know these things. I don't need Mind Read when I can take one look at your face."

Damn it.

I had a feeling that Dias's intuition wasn't a product of his skills.

"Also, Fran twitched at the mere mention of him."

Since Dias was the resident illusionist, he had a lot of skills related to sleight of hand and trickery. Little wonder that he paid so much attention to the little things.

"We met him outside the guild."

"Yesterday?"

"Hm."

We were on our way to see you.

"That must've been an awful experience. Elza was worried when you didn't show up... Now we know why. You didn't end up fighting him, did you?"

"Hm..."

He sure felt like he was in the mood for a fight.

Dias nodded.

"The Beast King treats negotiations no differently than physical brawls. You experienced his battle aura firsthand, I take it? I have to say I'm a little thankful that I don't have to warn him off you anymore... Anyway, I should probably explain how he ties into this."

What do you mean?

"Have a seat. This is going to be a long story."

"Hm. Okay."

Dias poured tea and told us his tale.

"Fifty-three years ago...Aurel and I were just starting out. We were D-Ranks."

Dias would've been in his teens. He must've been a really talented kid—although Fran was much more talented of course.

"We were the youngest D-Ranks at the time. It got to our heads. Naturally, someone came along to serve us some humble pie."

"And that someone was the Black Cat girl?"

"That's right. Her name was Kiara and she was fifteen. The other adventurers hated her, although they weren't bothered by her tribe. They couldn't accept that a girl that young could be so strong. We were among them."

Adventurers were always the same. I could imagine what happened after that: threats followed by violence.

"But Kiara could handle herself, and she was more than happy to provide firsthand evidence to anyone who said she was weak. She even ran dungeons by herself. Soon, she had all the adventurers calling her Black Cat."

Kiara's story reminded me of Fran. I wondered if she was carrying a piece of manatech on her, or if she was just naturally talented.

"Adventuring life went on, and she saved Aurel and me from a life-threatening situation. We teamed up a lot after that. Never a dull moment when she was with us."

"And you liked her?"

"Hahaha. You don't waste time, do you? Good question. I admired her, yes, and I definitely thought she was beautiful."

Dias smiled a lonely smile. He still couldn't forget her.

“She was looking for a way to evolve. She had already hit the level cap by then, and she looked all over the land for clues before she came to Ulmutt. I think she learned something after meeting Lumina a bunch of times in the dungeon.”

“You think?”

“Yes. But she was gone before we could ask.”

Did she leave so she could evolve?

“I don’t think so. She asked me and Aurel to help her with her evolution, you see.”

That was odd. Kiara would’ve at least told her friends.

“We assumed that something had happened to her and looked high and low, but we couldn’t find her. Although our search wasn’t unfruitful.”

“What did you find?”

“First, Lumina and Kiara had had a massive argument before she disappeared. I don’t know the details, but she explicitly told Aurel to mind his own damn business.”

What happened? I didn’t think Lumina would ever do anything to actively hurt a Black Cat.

“Well, in any case, Lumina had nothing to do with her disappearance. Trust me, I read her mind.”

Lumina was just as shocked and saddened by it.

“But we know that Kiara somehow learned about her evolution requirements. We suspect that her disappearance was linked to that.”

Someone went after her because she wasn’t supposed to know?

“I think so, yes. I found some suspicious characters soon after she disappeared.”

“Which would be?”

“The then-reigning Beast King, the father of our current one. More specifically, the Blue Cats who worked for him. I don’t have any concrete evidence, but it was all very suspicious.”

Dias told Fran about the Blue Cats who were spotted around Kiara’s lodgings soon after her disappearance. Eventually, Aurel’s beastmen connections found something big. It turned out that the ancient beastmen tribes were ruled not by a Golden Lion, but a Black Tiger.

That would explain why the Beast King feared a Black Tiger uprising. Once the Black Cats figured out how to evolve, they could take their revenge on the Golden Lions and Blue Cats for 500 years of oppression. No wonder the Blue Cats were given free reign to enslave them. The royal family was pretty much backing them.

To the Blue Cats, this was a chance to usurp the high position the Black Cats had occupied. The gods might have wiped the memory of Black Cat evolution from the people’s minds, but the hatred and animosity between the two tribes remained. The Blues must’ve been more than happy to enslave their old enemies.

“We tor—questioned the Blue Cats in town. They said they informed their elders about Kiara. Soon after, one of the Beast King’s private aides was dispatched to deal with her directly.”

Kiara had probably been either killed or kidnapped by the Beast King, but I kept that speculation to myself. Fran was brimming with murderous energy, even more intense than what she’d directed at Solus. Good thing Dias was the only one here. Anyone else would’ve passed out.

“And you’re sure of this?”

“Only conjecture. Although the Beast King’s involvement is the one thing we know for sure.”

Fran’s eyes darkened. If she didn’t already know how terrifying the Beast King was, she would’ve rushed out of Dias’s office to seek him out. But it would be suicide. The Beast King was a monstrous combatant, and there was still the matter of his personal guard. Fran would have to evolve first.

She tried quelling her anger by clenching her fists so tight I almost expected them to bleed. In the end, her entire body shook in fury.

“I trust you won’t go out looking for the Beast King as soon as we’re done?”

“Hm...” Fran nodded reluctantly. She was fighting every instinct to bust down the door and demand answers.

“Listen to me. First, you evolve. Then, you get stronger. Do not throw away your life.”

“Hm.”

Dias went on to explain the deal with Lumina. After mourning Kiara’s disappearance, they agreed that they would help the next Kiara—any Black Cat—that came to Ulmutt. This was the foundation of the cooperation between Guildmaster, Dungeon Master, and country. They would search for Kiara’s whereabouts, and put the Black Cats under their guard. No wonder Lumina was so friendly with Fran.

“I will announce your promotion tomorrow.”

“All right.”

So soon?

“The sooner the better. Go take care of the details downstairs. It won’t take more than five minutes.”

We left Dias's office and headed to the reception area to take care of Fran's promotion. It was as easy as touching a crystal to our guild card. No fuss, no muss. Fran was now officially C-Rank.

You did it, Fran!

"Hm."

Fran sat on her bed in the inn and marveled at her newly-minted guild card. It felt like I hadn't seen her smile in a long time.

We need to celebrate this! All-you-can-eat curry for dinner! Any kind of topping you want!

"Hm! Fried chicken, tonkatsu, Salisbury, and boiled eggs. Extra large."

Fran's order sounded like a challenge item in a restaurant, but she could definitely finish it.

Eat up now!

"Hm!"

And Jet, here's your Hellfire Curry.

"Woof woof!"

I took our existing ultrahot curry and threw in some extra spicy peppers in to make it even spicier. The result was as red and hot as its namesake, but Jet salivated as he ogled it. I didn't think I would like it, even if I had a body. Fran certainly wasn't taking any.

"Arf arf!"

Jet dug into the red-hot curry with the ferocity of a rabid direwolf eating its quarry. Meanwhile, Fran was already halfway down Curry Mountain. I might as well prepare her next plate, before she reclaimed the entire mountain range into her stomach.

"More!"

“Woof!”

Fran and Jet smiled.

Ulmutt had presented us with many challenges and it was nice that they finally got to unwind.

I just hope we can finish the tournament without a hitch...



Aside

“YOU CALLED, Master Rig?”

“Royce, where the hell are Godo and the others? I’m bored out of my skull. I want someone to spar with.”

“They’re on reconnaissance, sir.”

“Are they now? Well? Any new developments?”

“Some...although nothing noteworthy.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

“You remember Lord Aurel?”

“Widget Aurel. Of course. The guy was glaring at me our entire conversation. He’s old, but I bet he’d put up a good fight.”

“Please don’t. He is quite an influential character in this country. He might be of use in the future.”

“Yeah, yeah. So, what happened to him?”

“The subject left Lord Aurel’s mansion and visited the Adventurer’s Guild right after.”

“That’s it? She do anything funny along the way?”

“No.”

“Boring.”

“Godo is still observing her. He will have more information when he returns.”

“So what do you think of that Cat?”

“I’m not sure I follow...”

“You think she’ll do whatever I say?”

“No, I do not.”

"I'm the King of the Beast Tribes, you know."

"But you have no authority in this land. Not to mention the Black Cat slaves you own. It is safe to say that she already hates you."

"Hahaha! Yeah?"

"You seem pleased, Master Rig."

"Well, you know what happens to those who oppose me."

"And what would that be?"

"That's grounds for execution."

"It certainly is not. Why not threaten her first? Get her to do your bidding?"

"Because it won't be any fun that way!"

"Of course. Please, try not to kill her? We could use her as a slave. Although, I will say she isn't as pivotal as Lord Aurel. But still."

"So you do agree! Oh, I can't wait. This trip to Granzell was a good idea after all! Heheh... Hahahahaha!"

Afterword

GOOD MORNING, I'm Yuu Tanaka. Thank you for buying Volume 5 of *Reincarnated as a Sword*. We somehow made our deadline. Thank goodness! By the way, I'm not writing this part in the morning or anything. I just thought I'd switch up my greeting a little. If you're reading this at night, good morning to you too!

I mentioned in a previous column that I was a *kemonomimi* fan, but one of my friends took issue with that. They said that to be a kemonomimi enthusiast, I had to love animal heads, mammaries, and fur too. At least, that was their opinion. There are sects within the kemonomimi kingdom of course: Fluffites and Tailians, just to name a few. And there are too many subgenres to list here.

"So I'm not a kemonomimi fan...?! Then what *am* I? But never mind that, there's a chance that I've improperly used the term in my previous works!" I panicked and began scouring the net for information. In the end all I learned was that, under different situations, different people used the word to mean completely different things.

As someone who likes primarily ears and tails, I am a Kemomimist. I will continue carrying the cross of Kemomimist under the umbrella term of kemonomimi fan.

With two titles underway, my workload has increased accordingly, and there are times when I feel ready to weep while I write... I'm just glad I managed to hit my deadline. Please give *The Life and Times of a Late Bloomer Tamer* a read if you have the chance. There are some slight differences in the content ever since it changed publishers. There're pretty pictures in there, too.

Personal shilling aside, I should talk about *Reincarnated as a Sword* now. Fair warning for those of you who like reading the postscript first: spoilers ahead.

Volume 5 has been the most difficult book to write so far. I had to lay the groundwork for the story of future volumes, and couldn't make it up as I went like I did with Volume 3. Readers of the online edition will know what I'm talking about. Solus's subplot kind of went away there, but he enjoyed more screen time and relevance here, which made me happy. Aside from comments about how I just decided to throw that one in of course.

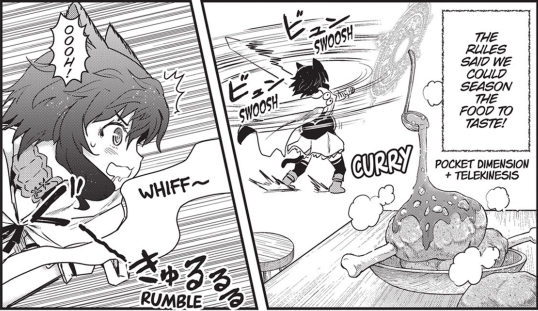
But hey, wow, we're at Volume 5 now. We wouldn't be here without you. Really. While it is never enough to express my gratitude, it is time for acknowledgements.

To Micro Magazine and my editor, I-san: Thank you for all you help, despite having a really tight schedule and working on two concurrent titles. Thank you to everyone involved in the printing process and of course, thank you, dear reader.

The manga is going great, too, and the latest special edition comes with a drama CD. I should buy myself a nice dinner to celebrate once everything is official.

As I said in the last postscript, the world of *Reincarnated as a Sword* is getting larger and larger, and I hope you continue enjoying it as much as I do.

Thank you for reading all the way to the end.





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